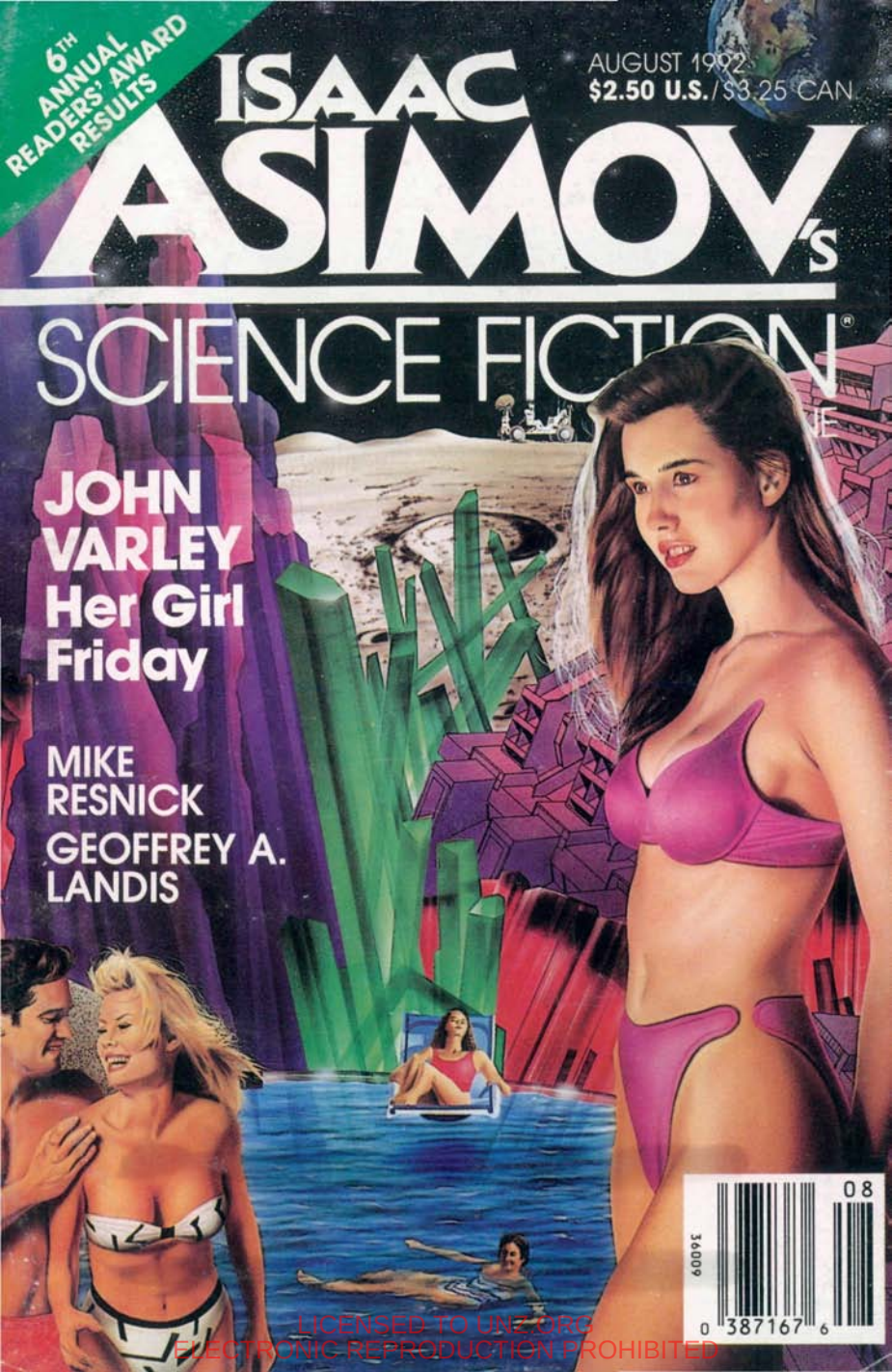

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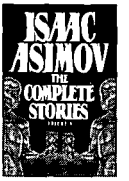

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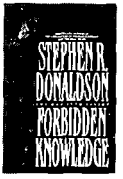

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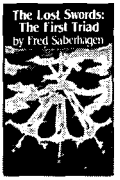

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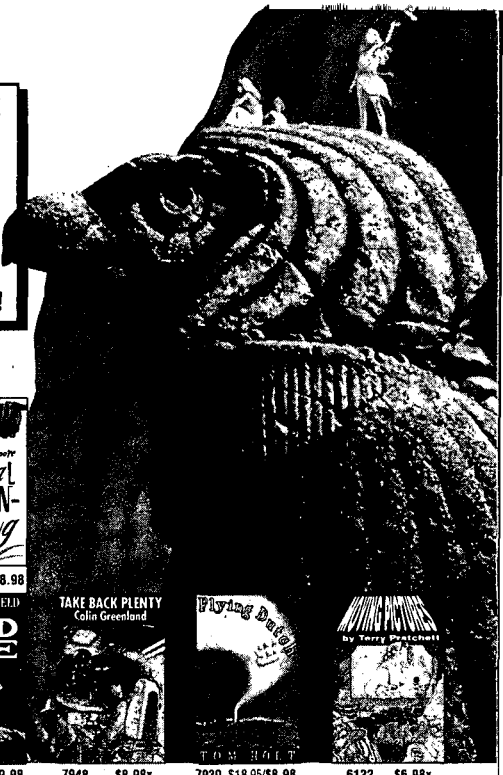

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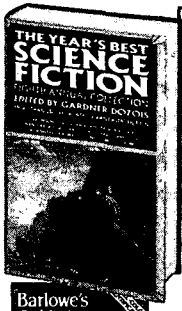

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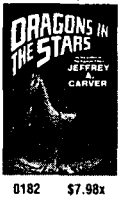

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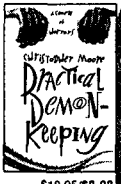

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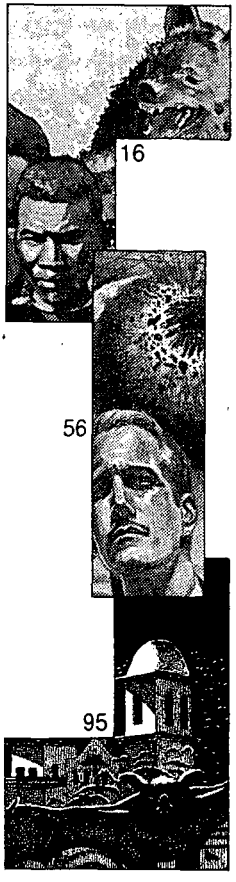

ISAAC ASIMOV's SCIENCE FICTION® MAGAZINE

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August 1992
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July 21, 1992

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

SOLD!

Davis has sold its four fiction digests, including *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. As a result, I received a very peculiar attitude on the part of my friends. They approached me with wide grins on their faces and said, "Hey! They sold your magazine!" I presume they were under the impression that as the result of the sale I was ruined for life.

I didn't like that. I said to them, "See here, for over fifteen years I have received a fixed amount for the editorials I write. If I no longer for any reason wrote the editorials, I would still be paid. Besides, the magazines have been sold to Bantam Doubleday Dell—and Doubleday has been my loyal publisher for over forty years. There isn't a chance they'll try to get rid of me."

What really bothers me about the sale is the fate of the editors—of Sheila, of Gardner, and of Stan Schmidt, the editor of *Analog*. I visited them on a Tuesday recently and found them to be rather perturbed. They were having a meeting with the Dell people in the afternoon, and they weren't sure what would happen. So I said to them, "Listen guys, whatever happens, I'll back you up." They seemed very relieved at that, but to tell you the truth, how on earth I was going to back them up I haven't the faintest idea. However, I waited from day to day for a phone call and thought I would figure what to do if they called me. Fortunately, they didn't call me.

When I showed up at Davis the following Tuesday, everyone was grinning like gargoyles. Apparently the meeting had gone very well. Now there are suggestions that they all move into other offices. Sheila will have an office to herself instead of having to share one with Gardner. In addition, there is talk about Doubleday buying a complete new building for themselves and, naturally, it will be easier for me because once *IAsfm* is housed with Doubleday it seems to me that it will be closer to home.

So it would seem that the sale has been successful in all sorts of ways, and we are all pleased. In the meantime, we'll go on trying to give our readers the best in science fiction. ●

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EDITORS' NOTE

We'll be sure to let you know when our editorial offices *do* move sometime next year. Meanwhile, all manuscript submissions, requests for guidelines, and editorial correspondence should still be sent to *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10168-0035.

Addresses for other matters will not be changing. Please continue to send all questions, order forms, and correspondence about subscriptions to P.O. Box 7058, Red Oak, Iowa 51566. Back issues are still available for $3.50 from *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, P.O. Box 40, Vernon, New Jersey 07462.

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6TH ANNUAL READERS' AWARD RESULTS

Photo credit: Jane Jewell

From left to right: Geoffrey A. Landis, Christoph Haas-Heye, Nancy Kress, Gardner Dozois, Sheila Williams, Jane Yolen, Laura Lakey.

Well, another year has come and gone, and once again the readers have spoken—and *that* means that it's time to tell you the winners of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*'s Sixth Annual Readers' Award poll. As always, these were *your* choices, the stories and artwork and poetry that *you*—the readers—liked best out of all the stuff we published in 1991. The readers were the only judges for this particular award—no juries, no experts—and, once again, it's

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intriguing to compare results with the Hugo and Nebula ballots, as well as with the readers' polls conducted by *Locus* and *SF Chronicle*... as always, there were some fascinating similarities, but also some equally fascinating differences. This year's winners, and runners-up were:

NOVELLA

1. **"Beggars in Spain," Nancy Kress**
2. "Forward the Foundation," Isaac Asimov (tie)
2. "Frankenswine," Janet Kagan (tie)
3. "Raising Cane," Janet Kagan
4. "Jack," Connie Willis
5. "And Wild for to Hold," Nancy Kress
6. "The Gallery of His Dreams," Kristine Kathryn Rusch
7. "By the Time We Got to Gaugamela," R. Garcia y Robertson
8. "Bully!" Mike Resnick
9. "The Fourth Intercometary," Phillip C. Jennings
10. "Candle," Tony Daniel

NOVELETTE

1. **"Understand," Ted Chiang**
2. "The July Ward," S.N. Dyer
3. "Miracle," Connie Willis
4. "Living Will," Alexander Jablokov
5. "The Happy Man," Jonathan Lethem
6. "Water Bringer," Mary Rosenblum
7. "The Bee Man," Mary Rosenblum
8. "Second Cousin Twice Removed," Cynthia Felice
9. "Fin de Cyclé," Howard Waldrop
10. "The Return of Weird Frank," Allen Steele

SHORT STORY

1. **"A Walk in the Sun," Geoffrey A. Landis**
2. "Press Ann," Terry Bisson
3. "Robot Visions," Isaac Asimov
4. "A Flying Saucer with Minnesota Plates," Lawrence Watt-Evans
5. "Books," Peni R. Griffin
6. "Bright Light, Big City," Greg Costikyan
7. "The Odor of Cocktail Cigarettes," Ian Watson
8. "One Perfect Morning, with Jackals," Mike Resnick
9. "Details," Lawrence Person
10. "The Hole in Edgar's Hillside," Gregory Frost (tie)
10. "In the Late Cretaceous," Connie Willis (tie)

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BEST POEM

1. **"Angles Fly Because They Take Themselves Lightly," Jane Yolen**
2. "Extinction," Michael Bishop
3. "The SF Editor's Lament," Joe Haldemen
4. "A Child's Garden of Grammar: Nouns, Adjectives, Pronouns, If/Then, Maybe," Thomas M. Disch (tie)
4. "Christmas Father," Robert Frazier & James Patrick Kelly (tie)
5. "Entropy Ad," E.R. Stewart
6. "The Watcher," David Lunde
7. "Carbon Star," Joe Haldeman
8. "Verbs," Thomas M. Disch
9. "The Number of the Man," Joe Haldeman (tie)
9. "Consider the Amoeba," Arthur E. Stamps III (tie)
10. "1967 NFC Championship Game Remembered After Awakening from Cryogenic Sleep," Roger Dutcher

BEST COVER ARTIST

1. **Bob Eggleton (tie)**
1. **Gary Freeman (tie)**
2. Broeck Steadman
3. Dorian Vallejo
4. Steven Crisp
5. Alan Gutierrez
6. Wayne Barlowe
7. Nicholas Jainschigg

BEST INTERIOR ARTIST

1. **Laura Lakey**
2. Gary Freeman
3. Janet Aulisio
4. Broeck Steadman
5. Bob Walters
6. Terry Lee
7. John Johnson
8. Pat Morrissey
9. Steve Cavallo
10. A.C. Farley

Both our Readers' Awards and *Analog*'s Analytical Laboratory Awards were presented on April 25th, 1992 at the Sheraton Colony Square Hotel in Atlanta, Georgia, during a breakfast hosted by new Publisher Christoph Haas-Heye. After breakfast, the awards were presented in a brief ceremony, each winner receiving a cash award and a certificate beautifully hand-lettered by Philadelphia artist Tess Kissinger. Of the *IAsfm* winners, Nancy Kress, Geoffrey A. Landis, Jane Yolen, and Laura Lakey were on hand to receive their awards in person; other guests at the award breakfast included Charles N. Brown, publisher of *Locus*, and several of the Analytical Laboratory winners. Later on that night, everyone assembled for the annual Nebula Award Banquet, which was also held at the Sheraton Colony Square Hotel.

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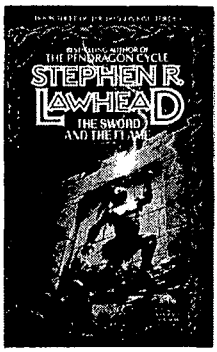

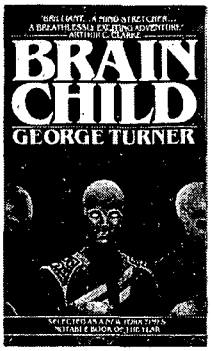

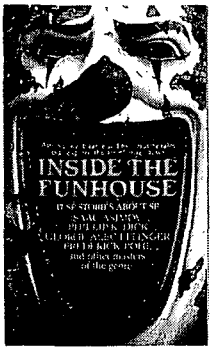

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LETTERS

Dear Editor,

I enjoyed Norman Spinrad's column titled "Style" in your November 1991 issue. I liked his theoretical discussion enough to add a large part of it (Page 310: "Only prose can render . . .") to my file of important quotes. But I had some problems with his examples.

To begin with a simile: mounting a picture behind glass keeps it flat, but the glare is distracting; so I prefer to use "glareless" glass. Literary style may be thought of as the frame and glass that "present" a picture, and glareless glass, which utterly disappears, is like the "transparent" literary style much touted in SF. Mr. Spinrad's theoretical point is excellent: we can achieve some remarkable effects by abandoning transparency and *using* the glass as part of the overall composition. There is then no clear distinction between "picture" and "mounting." However, some of the examples he then cites, particularly Bear's *Queen of Angels,* seem simply *obscure.*

Obscurity-as-style seems counterproductive. Suppose that the current focal character is from the twenty-fourth century; the writer doesn't want to say "Qworp is from the twenty-fourth century, and those people are *really* strange." No, the reader has to be made somehow to *feel* the strangeness. Okay, so the author resorts to Joycean syntax. But the reader is not suddenly feeling strangeness. She's not feeling anything: she's diagramming sentences. If this is a character you want the reader to *inhabit,* you've lost the resonance between them. Obscure writing switches all the power to the analytical left side of the brain, and forces the reader out of the narrative.

How to show alienness is one of the great problems of all fiction, not just SF: you have the same problems if you want to put the reader inside Charles Manson, or make him live in fourth century Egypt. Two tools that work are: 1) *typography*: using asterisks, maybe, instead of quotes when a dragon is speaking; and 2) *dialect*: switching to archaic English, say, or cockney (as Tolkien did with his trolls). But for the most part, the problem is unsolved. As a scientist, I tend to attack difficult problems by first setting conditions on the solution(s): one of the bounds here is that the narrative FX must be *subtle* enough not to destroy the resonance that's been built up between the reader's mind and that of the character.

Writers, please: the question we have been discussing is important,

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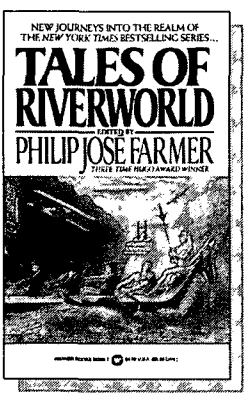
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A WORD FROM BRIAN THOMSEN

When we think of successful science fiction series many worlds come to mind, Asimov's Foundation, Herbert's Dune, McCaffrey's Pern, and who can forget Philip José Farmer's *Riverworld*. Through five major novels, we were treated to the epic of life along a planet-long river every-one who had ever lived was resurrected as part of some mysterious experiment.

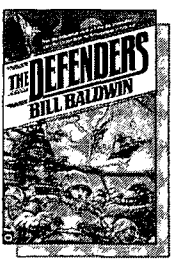
Obviously, there are more stories to tell in this series, and more characters with exploits both major and minor. I for one am grateful that Phil has returned to Riverworld for more tales, and, who knows, someday one of the stories may feature an editor from New York City (after all, theo-retically speaking, *even* editors were resurrected somewhere along the banks of the River).

...and when you see me around ask me about the Top Gun pilots of the future (they're just a month away).

ALSO THIS MONTH:

THE DEFENDERS

by Bill Baldwin



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but you must manage to include all the aspects of good writing (characterization, imagery, plot . . .) even while you experiment with presentation. And, as well, don't lose the one aspect that has distinguished great fiction of any genre: you must find ways to not only entertain your readers, but to inform us. For example, ever since I read *Stranger in a Strange Land*, I've had a whole new appreciation for *Rodin*.

Speaking of Heinlein, he made a pioneering foray away from "transparency" in *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*. I remember being put off at first by the style; but Heinlein could draw me into a story because (modern writers please take note) behind the frame, the glass *and* the picture, a fine mind was visible.

Jess Schilling
Huntington, PA

Please argue this out with Norman. I'm staying out of this.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I was dismayed by your remark in the November letter column that "writing good science fiction is a lot harder than writing fantasy and that that may be what has made fantasy so popular in recent years." To me, this seems to be a blinkered, short-sighted view not worthy of one such as yourself.

Fantasy, at its very best, depicts psychological reality, rather than the empirical reality depicted in "hard" SF. The realities created by writers such as Borges, García Marquez, Ellison, and Shepard are just as substantial and just as relevant to the existence of human beings as the physical reality that we are all so familiar with. They shape who we are and what we become. The basic premise of fantasy is that the internal reality manifests itself in the external, or empirical reality. This idea is demonstrated admirably by Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" or Ellison's "In Fear of K."

Naturally, the vast majority of fantasy does not reach this goal. But then again, neither does the majority of science fiction. The simple fact is that writers with the talent of Ellison, Silverberg, or yourself are rare (cf. "Sturgeon's Law").

In addition, I am very much afraid that your hope that "fantasy is a passing fad" is a vain one. Fantasy has dominated human literature virtually from the word go, and it is only recently that it has become disreputable. Consider the contents of the *Mahabharata*, *Beowulf*, the Theban Plays, the writings of Cyrano de Bergerac, Shakespeare, or Swift. Science fiction is simply the logical extension of this tradition in a technological age. It could be argued that science fiction itself is a kind of fantasy, since no matter how well researched the story, the author must ultimately create certain laws of reality to serve the purpose of the story. A spaceship traveling at FTL speeds, for example, stands in direct violation of all known laws of physics, and therefore cannot be seen as a result of scientific extrapolation. The idea of an FTL drive, ironically, is central to creating any kind of galactic empire, such as the one in your "Foundation" books.

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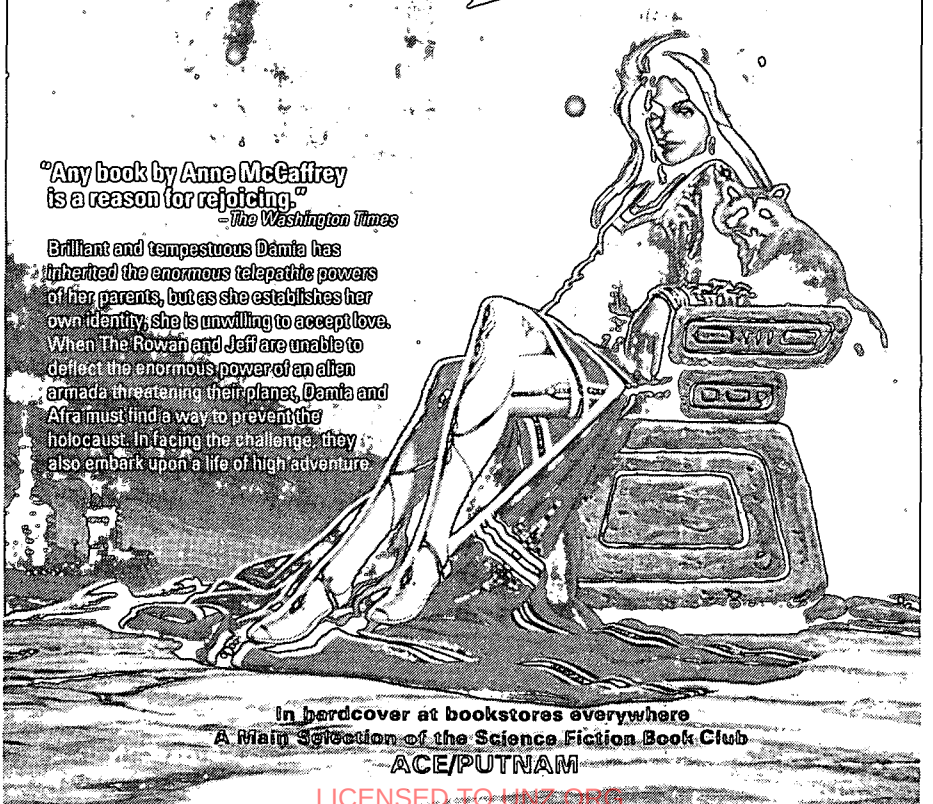
Announces the spellbinding sequel to the bestselling saga of *The Rowan*

ANNE McCAFFREY

DAMIA



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Finally, though, the basic idea expressed by your statement is insulting to those who do try to create fantasy with intelligence and integrity. I would never make the statement that writing is more difficult than any other art, whether it be poetry, rap music, painting, sculpture, or whatever. By extension, I would not state that writing in any particular genre is more difficult than writing in another. Creating a work of integrity is always a grueling process, no matter what your field. To say otherwise is a failure to respect another person's craft.

Chris Hall
Moorpark, CA

If I've hurt your feelings, I apologize, but I must stick to my original notion that fantasy is, for the most part, crap.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov

Bravo for your recent editorial "The Dismal Science" (November 1991). As usual you're right on the money—you understand economics extremely well. I would argue with Thomas Carlyle that the only thing scientific about economics is the dreary repeatability of it all, of old problems unresolved and new ones created. Now if we could only understand the economists and politicians, who dabble in surely the blackest of all arts.

Jaye Berry
Hamilton, ON
Canada

Thank you for your kind words.
—Isaac Asimov

Dear Isaac Asimov,

As an avid reader of science fiction, I would like to compliment you for your wonderful stories. I have been reading your stories for twenty years, and have liked them all. I'm writing to you, however, because I would really like to say how much I liked your editorial in the November issue of *IAsfm*. The tone of the article was great.

Although I believe that the people who should have read your editorial will never see it, I guess we can only hope they will live and learn.

Thanks for your time, and the many hours of entertainment your books and stories have provided.
Sincerely,

Dennis Joyce
Kansas City, KS

Thank you!

—Isaac Asimov

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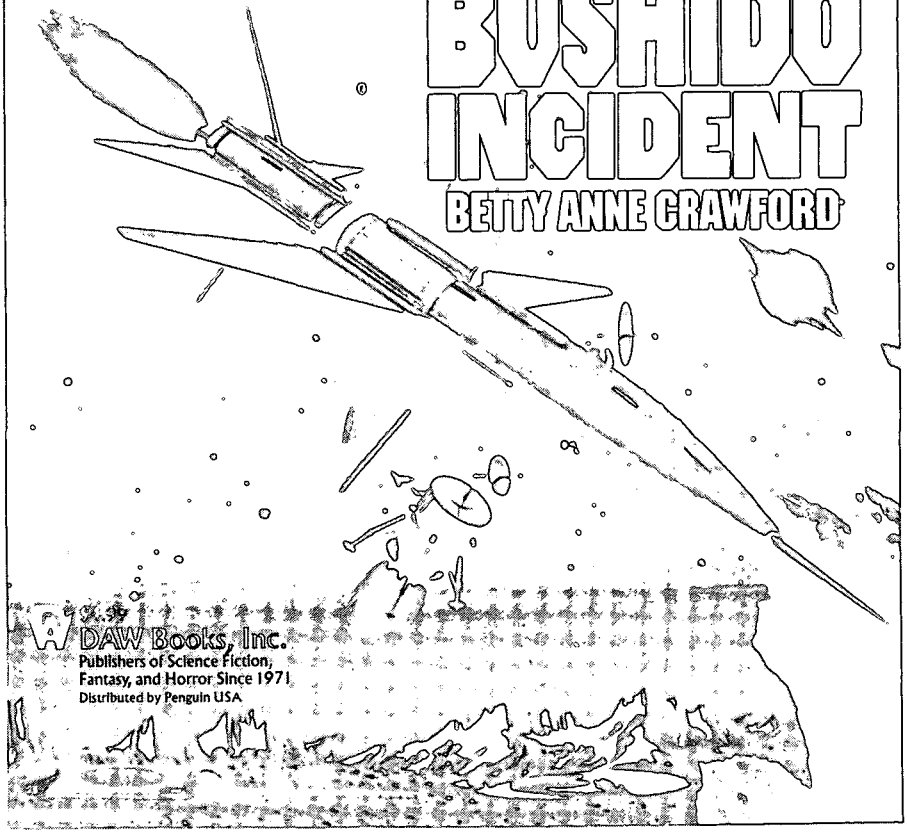
THE BUSHIDO INCIDENT

BETTY ANNE CRAWFORD



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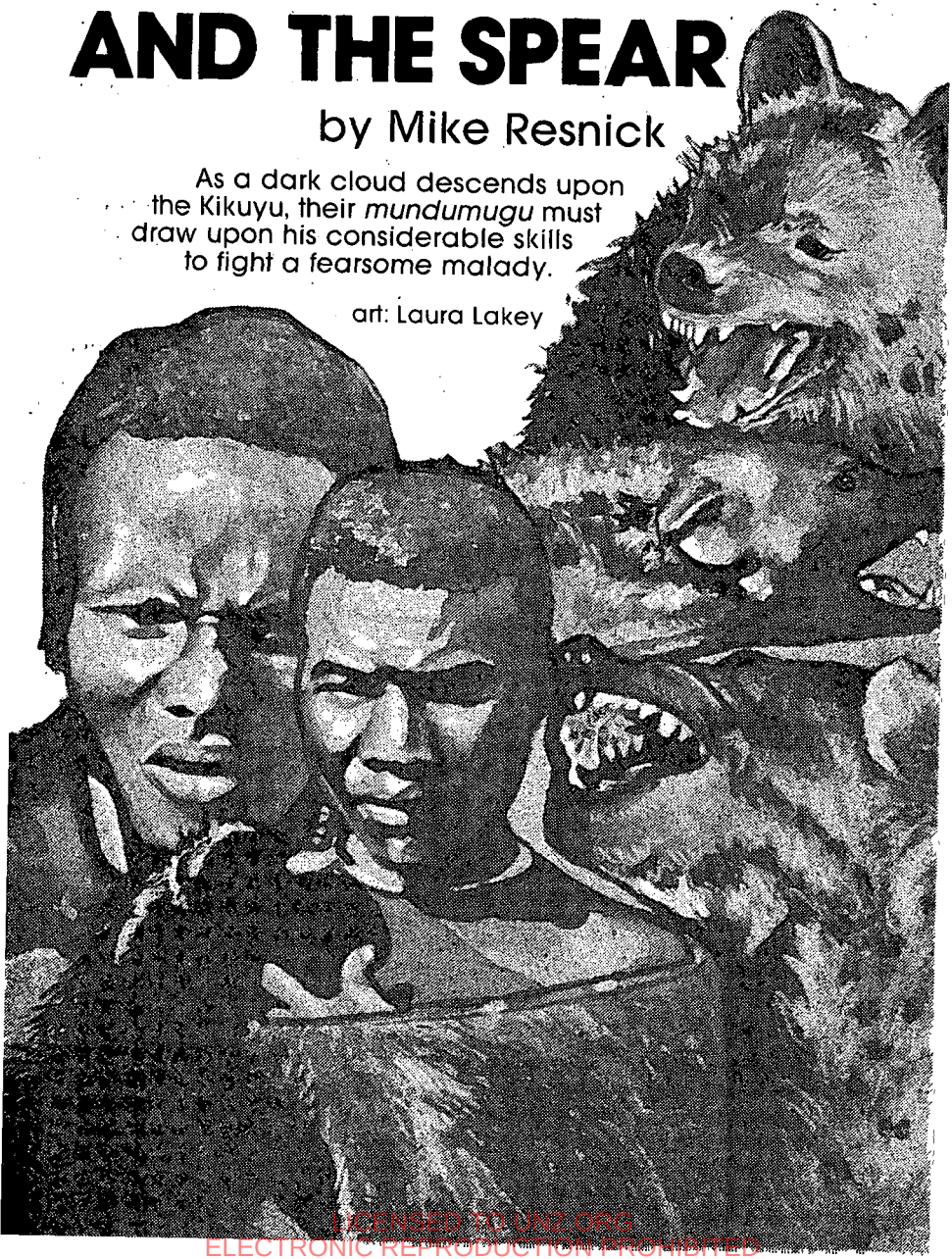
THE LOTUS AND THE SPEAR

by Mike Resnick

As a dark cloud descends upon the Kikuyu, their *mundumugu* must draw upon his considerable skills to fight a fearsome malady.

art: Laura Lakey



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Once, many eons ago, there was an elephant who climbed the slopes of Kirinyaga, which men now call Mount Kenya, until he reached the very summit, where Ngai ruled the universe from His golden throne.

"Why have you sought me out?" demanded Ngai.

"I have come to ask you to change me into something else," answered the elephant.

"I have made you the most powerful of beasts," said Ngai. "You need fear neither the lion nor the leopard nor the hyena. Wherever you walk, all My other creatures rush to move out of your path. Why do you no longer wish to be an elephant?"

"Because as powerful as I am, there are others of my kind who are more powerful," answered the elephant. "They keep the females to themselves, so that my seed will die within me, and they drive me away from the water holes and the succulent grasses."

"And what do you wish of Me?" asked Ngai.

"I am not sure," said the elephant. "I would like to be like the giraffe, for there are so many treetops that no matter where he goes he finds sustenance. Or perhaps the warthog, for nowhere can he travel that there are no roots to be found. And the fish eagle takes one mate for life, and if he is not strong enough to defend her against others of his kind who would take her away from him, his vision is so keen that he can see them approaching from great distances and move her to safety. Change me in any way you wish," he concluded. "I will trust to Your wisdom."

"So be it," pronounced Ngai. "From this day forward, you shall have a trunk, so that the delicacies that grow atop the acacia trees will no longer be beyond your reach. And you shall have tusks, that you may dig in the ground for both roots and water no matter where you travel upon My world. And where the fish eagle has but a single superior sense, his vision, I shall give you two senses, those of smell and hearing, that will be greater than any other animal in My kingdom."

"How can I thank you?" asked the elephant joyously, as Ngai began the transformation.

"You may not wish to," answered Ngai.

"Why not?" asked the elephant.

"Because when all is said and done," said Ngai, "you will still be an elephant."

Some days it is easy to be the *mundumugu*—the witch doctor—on our terraformed world of Kirinyaga. On such days, I bless the scarecrows in the fields, distribute charms and ointments to the ailing, tell stories to the children, offer my opinions to the Council of Elders, and teach my youthful assistant, Ndemi, the lore of the Kikuyu people—for the *mundumugu* is more than a maker of charms and curses, more even than a

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voice of reason in the Council of Elders: he is the repository of all the traditions that make the Kikuyu what they are.

Some days it is difficult to be the *mundumugu*. When I must decide disputes, one side will always be unhappy with me. Or when there is an illness that I cannot cure, and I know that soon I will be telling the sufferer's family to leave him out for the hyenas. Or when Ndemi, who will someday be the *mundumugu*, gives every indication that he will not be ready to assume my duties when my body, already old and wrinkled, reaches the point, not too long off, when it is no longer able to function.

And, once in a long while, it is terrible to be the *mundumugu*, for I am presented with a problem against which all the accumulated wisdom of the Kikuyu seems like a reed in the wind.

Such a day begins like any other. I awake from my slumber and walk out of my hut into my *boma* with my blanket wrapped around my shoulders, for though it will soon be warm the sun has not yet removed the chill from the air. I light a fire and sit next to it, waiting for Ndemi, who will almost certainly be late. Sometimes I marvel at the facility of his imagination, for never has he given me the same excuse twice.

As I grow older, I have taken to chewing a *qat* leaf in the morning to start the blood flowing through my body. Ndemi disapproves, for he has been taught the uses of *qat* as a medicine and he knows that it is addictive. I will explain to him again that without it I would probably be in constant pain until the sun was overhead, that when you are as old as I am your muscles and joints do not always respond to your commands and can fill you with agony, and he will shrug and nod his head and forget again by the following morning.

Eventually he will arrive, my young assistant, and after he explains why he was late today he will take my gourds down to the river and fill them with water, and then gather firewood and bring it to my *boma*. Then we will embark upon our daily lesson, in which perhaps I will explain to him how to make an ointment out of the pods of the acacia tree, and he will sit and try not to squirm and will demonstrate such self-control that he may well listen to me for ten or twelve minutes before asking when I will teach him how to turn an enemy into an insect so that he may stamp on him.

Finally I will take him into my hut, and teach him the rudiments of my computer, for after I am dead it will be Ndemi who will have to contact Maintenance and request the orbital adjustments that will affect the seasons, that will bring rain to the parched plains, that will make the days longer or shorter to give the illusion of seasonal changes.

Then, if it is to be an ordinary day, I will fill my pouch with charms and will begin walking through the fields, warding off any *thahu*, or curse, that has been placed on them, and assuring that they will continue

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to yield the food we need to survive, and if the rains have come and the land is green, perhaps I will slaughter a goat to thank Ngai for His beneficence.

If it is not to be an ordinary day, I usually know at the outset. Perhaps there will be hyena dung in my *boma,* a sure sign of a *thahu,* or the wind may come from the west, whereas all good winds blow from the east.

But on the day in question, there was no wind at all, and no hyenas had been in my *boma* the night before. It began like any other day. Ndemi was late—this time, he claimed, because there was a black mamba on the path up my hill, and he had to wait until it finally slithered off into the tall grasses—and I had just finished teaching him the prayer for health and long life that he must recite at the birth of a new baby, when Koinnage, the paramount chief of the village, walked up to my *boma.*

"*Jambo,* Koinnage," I greeted him, dropping my blanket to the ground, for the sun was now overhead and the air was finally warm.

"*Jambo,* Koriba," he replied, a worried frown on his face.

I looked at him expectantly, for it is very rare for Koinnage to climb my hill and visit me in my *boma.*

"It has happened again," he announced grimly. "This is the third time since the long rains."

"What has happened?" I asked, confused.

"Ngala is dead," said Koinnage. "He walked out naked and unarmed among the hyenas, and they killed him."

"Naked and unarmed?" I repeated. "Are you certain?"

"I am certain."

I squatted down near my dying fire, lost in thought. Keino was the first young man we had lost. We had thought it was an accident, that he had stumbled and somehow fallen upon his own spear. Then came Njupo, who burned to death when his hut caught fire while he was inside it.

Keino and Njupo lived with the young, unmarried men in a small colony by the edge of the forest, a few kilometers from the main village. Two such deaths might have been coincidence, but now there was a third, and it cast a new light on the first two. It was now obvious that, within the space of a few brief months, three young men had chosen to commit suicide rather then continue their lives on Kirinyaga.

"What are we to do, Koriba?" asked Koinnage. "My own son lives at the edge of the forest. He could be the next one!"

I took a round, polished stone from the pouch about my neck, stood up, and handed it to him.

"Place this beneath your son's sleeping blanket," I said. "It will protect him from this *thahu* that is affecting our young men."

"Thank you, Koriba," he said gratefully. "But can you not provide charms for *all* the young men?"

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"No," I replied, still greatly disturbed by what I had heard. "That stone is only for the son of a chief. And just as there are all kinds of charms, there are all kinds of curses. I must determine who has placed this *thahu* on our young men, and why. Then and only then can I create strong enough magic to combat it." I paused. "Can Ndemi bring you some *pombe* to drink?"

He shook his head. "I must return to the village. The women are wailing the death chant, and there is much to be done. We must burn Ngala's hut and purify the ground upon which it rested, and we must post guards to make sure that the hyenas, having feasted so easily, do not come back in search of more human flesh."

He turned and took a few steps toward the village, then stopped.

"Why is this happening, Koriba?" he asked, his eyes filled with puzzlement. "And is the *thahu* limited just to the young men, or do the rest of us bear it too?"

I had no answer for him, and after a moment he resumed walking down the path that led to the village.

I sat down next to my fire and stared silently out over the fields and savannah until Ndemi finally sat down next to me.

"What kind of *thahu* would make Ngala and Keino and Njupo all kill themselves, Koriba?" he asked, and I could tell from his tone that he was frightened.

"I am not sure yet," I replied. "Keino was very much in love with Mwala, and he was very unhappy when old Siboki was able to pay the bride price for her before he himself could. If it were just Keino, I would say that he ended his life because he could not have her. But now two more have died, and I must find the reason for it."

"They all live in the village of young men by the edge of the forest," said Ndemi. "Perhaps *it* is cursed."

I shook my head. "They have not all killed themselves."

"You know," said Ndemi,"when Nboka drowned in the river two rains ago, we all thought it was an accident. But he, too, lived in the village of young men. Perhaps he killed himself as well."

I had not thought of Nboka in a long time. I thought of him now, and realized that he could very well have committed suicide. Certainly it made sense, for Nboka was known to be a very strong swimmer.

"I think perhaps you are right," I replied reluctantly.

Ndemi's chest puffed up with pride, for I do not often compliment him.

"What kind of magic will you make, Koriba?" he asked. "If it requires the feathers of the crested crane or the maribou stork, I could get them for you. I have been practicing with my spear."

"I do not know what magic I shall make yet, Ndemi," I told him. "But whatever it is, it will require thought and not spears."

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"That is too bad," he said, shielding his eyes from the dust that a sudden warm breeze brought to us. "I thought I had finally found a use for it."

"For what?"

"For my spear," he said. "I no longer herd cattle on my father's *shamba,* now that I am helping you, so I no longer need it." He shrugged. "I think I shall leave it at home from now on."

"No, you must always take it with you," I said. "It is customary for all Kikuyu men to carry spears."

He looked inordinately proud of himself, for I had called him a man, when in truth he was just a *kehee,* an uncircumcised boy. But then he frowned again.

"Why do we carry spears, Koriba?" he asked.

"To protect us from our enemies."

"But the Maasai and Wakamba and other tribes, and even the Europeans, remain in Kenya," he said. "What enemies have we here?"

"The hyena and the jackal and the crocodile," I answered, and added silently: *And one other enemy, which must be identified before we lose any more of our young men, for without them there is no future, and ultimately no Kirinyaga.*

"It has been a long time since anyone needed a spear against a hyena," continued Ndemi. "They have learned to fear us and avoid us." He pointed to the domestic animals that were grazing in the nearby fields. "They do not even bother the goats and the cattle any more."

"Did they not bother Ngala?" I asked.

"He *wanted* to be eaten by hyenas," said Ndemi. "That is different."

"Nonetheless, you must carry your spear at all times," I said. "It is part of what makes you a Kikuyu."

"I have an idea!" he said, suddenly picking up his spear and studying it. "If I *must* carry a spear, perhaps I should have one with a metal tip, so that it will never warp or break."

I shook my head. "Then you would be a Zulu, who live far to the south of Kenya, for it is the Zulus who carry metal-tipped spears, which they call *assegais.*"

Ndemi looked crestfallen. "I thought it was my own idea," he said.

"Do not be disappointed," I said. "An idea can be new to you and old to someone else."

"Really?"

I nodded."Take these young men who have killed themselves. The idea of suicide is new to them, but they are not the first to think of it. We have *all* thought of killing ourselves at one time or another. What I must learn is not why they have finally thought of it, but why they have not rejected the thought, why it has become *attractive* to them."

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"And then you will use your magic to make it unattractive?" asked Ndemi.

"Yes."

"Will you boil poisonous serpents in a pot with the blood of a freshly killed zebra?" he asked eagerly.

"You are a very bloodthirsty boy," I said.

"A *thahu* that can kill four young men requires powerful magic," he replied.

"Sometimes just a word or a sentence is all the magic one needs."

"But *if* you need more. . . "

I sighed deeply. "If I need more, I will tell you what animals to slay for me."

He leaped to his feet, picked up his slender wooden spear, and made stabbing motions in the air. "I will become the most famous hunter ever!" he shouted happily. "My children and grandchildren will sing songs of praise to me, and the animals of the field will tremble at my approach!"

"But before that happy day arrives," I said, "there is still the water to be fetched and the firewood to be gathered."

"Yes, Koriba," he said. He picked up my water gourds and began walking down the hill, and I could tell that in his imagination he was still confronting charging buffalos and hurling his spear straight and true to the mark.

I gave Ndemi his morning lesson—the prayer for the dead seemed a proper topic—and then went down to the village to comfort Ngala's parents. His mother, Liswa, was inconsolable. He had been her first-born, and it was all but impossible to get her to stop wailing the death chant long enough for me to express my sorrow.

Kibanja, Ngala's father, stood off by himself, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Why would he do such a thing, Koriba?" he asked as I approached him.

"I do not know," I answered.

"He was the boldest of boys," he continued. "Even you did not frighten him." He stopped suddenly for fear that he had given offense.

"He was very bold," I agreed. "And bright."

"That is true," agreed Kibanja. "Even when the other boys would lie up beneath the shade trees during the heat of the day, my Ngala was always finding new games to play, new things to do." He looked at me through tortured eyes. "And now my only son is dead, and I do not know why."

"I will find out," I told him.

"It is wrong, Koriba," he continued. "It is against the nature of things.

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I was meant to die first, and then all that I own—my *shamba,* my cattle, my goats—everything would have been his." He tried to hold back his tears, for although the Kikuyu are not as arrogant as the Maasai, our men do not like to display such emotions in public. But the tears came anyway, making moist paths down his dusty cheeks before falling onto the dirt. "He did not even live long enough to take a wife and present her with a son. All that he was has died with him. What sin did he commit to merit such a dreadful *thahu?* Why could it not have struck *me* down and let him live?"

I remained with him a few more minutes, assured him that I would ask Ngai to welcome Ngala's spirit, and then I began walking to the colony of young men, which was about three kilometers beyond the village. It backed up to a dense forest, and was bordered to the south by the same river that wound through the village and broadened as it passed my hill.

It was a small colony, composed of no more than twenty young men. As each had undergone the circumcision ritual and passed into manhood, he had moved out from his father's *boma* and taken up residence here with the other bachelors of the village. It was a transitional dwelling place, for eventually each member would marry and take over part of his family's *shamba,* to be replaced by the next group of young men.

Most of the residents had gone to the village when they heard the death chants, but a few of them had remained behind to burn Ngala's hut and destroy the evil spirits within it. They greeted me gravely, as befitted the occasion, and asked me to utter the chant that would purify the ground so that they would not forever be required to avoid stepping on it.

When I was done, I placed a charm at the very center of the ashes, and then the young men began drifting away—all but Murumbi, who had been Ngala's closest friend.

"What can you tell me about this, Murumbi?" I asked when we were finally alone.

"He was a good friend," he replied. "We spent many long days together. I will miss him."

"Do you know why he killed himself?"

"He did not kill himself," answered Murumbi. "He was killed by hyenas."

"To walk naked and unarmed among the hyenas is to kill oneself," I said.

Murumbi continued staring at the ashes. "It was a stupid way to die," he said bitterly. "It solved nothing."

"What problem do you think he was trying to solve?" I asked.

"He was very unhappy," said Murumbi.

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"Were Keino and Njupo also unhappy?"

He looked surprised. "You know?"

"Am I not the *mundumugu?*" I replied.

"But you said nothing when they died."

"What do you think I should have said?" I asked.

Murumbi shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know." He paused. "No, there was nothing you could have said."

"What about you, Murumbi?" I said.

"Me, Koriba?"

"Are you unhappy?"

"As you said, you are the *mundumugu*. Why ask questions to which you already know the answers?"

"I would like to hear the answer from your own lips," I replied.

"Yes, I am unhappy."

"And the other young men?" I continued. "Are they unhappy too?"

"Most of them are very happy," said Murumbi, and I noticed just the slightest edge of contempt in his tone. "Why should they not be? They are men now. They spend their days in idle talk, and painting their faces and their bodies, and at nights they go to the village and drink *pombe* and dance. Soon some of them will marry and sire children and start *shambas* of their own, and some day they will sit in the Council of Elders." He spat on the ground. "Indeed, there is no reason why they should not be happy, is there?"

"None," I agreed.

He stared defiantly at me.

"Perhaps you would like to tell me the reason for *your* unhappiness?" I suggested.

"Are you not the *mundumugu?*" he said caustically.

"Whatever else I am, I am not your enemy."

He sighed deeply, and the tension seemed to drain from his body, to be replaced by resignation. "I know you are not, Koriba," he said. "It is just that there are times when I feel like this entire world is my enemy."

"Why should that be?" I asked. "You have food to eat and *pombe* to drink, you have a hut to keep you warm and dry, there are only Kikuyu here, you have undergone the circumcision ritual and are now a man, you live in a world of plenty . . . so why should you feel that such a world is your enemy?"

He pointed to a black she-goat that was grazing placidly a few yards away.

"Do you see that goat, Koriba?" he asked. "She accomplishes more with her life than I do with mine."

"Don't be silly," I said.

"I am being serious," he replied. "Every day she provides milk for the

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village, once a year she produces a kid, and when she dies it will almost certainly be as a sacrifice to Ngai. She has a purpose to her life."

"So have we all."

He shook his head. "That is not so, Koriba."

"You are bored?" I asked.

"If the journey through life can be likened to a journey down a broad river, then I feel that I am adrift with no land in sight."

"But you *have* a destination in sight," I said. "You will take a wife, and start a *shamba*. If you work hard, you will own many cattle and goats. You will raise many sons and daughters. What is wrong with that?"

"Nothing," he said, "if *I* had anything to do with it. But my wife will raise my children and till my fields, and my sons will herd my animals, and my daughters will weave the fabric for my garments and help their mothers cook my food." He paused. "And I . . . I will sit around with the other men, and discuss the weather, and drink *pombe,* and someday, if I live long enough, I will join the Council of Elders, and the only thing that will change is that I will now talk to my friends in Koinnage's *boma* instead of my own. And then one day I will die. *That* is the life I must look forward to, Koriba."

He kicked the ground with his foot, sending up little flurries of dust. "I will *pretend* that my life has more meaning than that of a she-goat," he continued. "I will walk ahead of my wife while she carries the firewood, and I will tell myself that I am doing this to protect her from attack by the Maasai or the Wakamba. I will build my *boma* taller than a man's head and lay thorns across the top of it, and tell myself that this is to protect my cattle against the lion and the leopard, and I will try not to remember that there have never been any lions or leopards on Kirinyaga. I will never be without my spear, though I do nothing but lean on it when the sun is high in the sky, and I will tell myself that without it I could be torn to pieces by man or beast. All these things I will tell myself, Koriba . . . but I will know that I am lying."

"And Ngala and Keino and Njupo felt the same way?" I said.

"Yes."

"Why did they kill themselves?" I asked. "It is written in our charter that anyone who wishes to leave Kirinyaga may do so. They need only have walked to that area known as Haven, and a Maintenance ship would have picked them up and taken them anywhere they wished to go."

"You still not understand, do you?" he said.

"No, I do not," I admitted. "Enlighten me."

"Men have reached the stars, Koriba," he said. "They have medicines and machines and weapons that are beyond our imagining. They live in

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cities that dwarf our village." He paused again. "But here on Kirinyaga, we live the life that we lived before the Europeans came and brought the forerunners of such things with them. We live as the Kikuyu have always lived, as you say we were meant to live. How, then, can we go back to Kenya? What could we do? How would we feed and shelter ourselves? The Europeans changed us from Kikuyu into Kenyans once before, but it took many years and many generations. You and the others who created Kirinyaga meant no harm, you only did what you thought was right, but you have seen to it that I can never become a Kenyan. I am too old, and I am starting too far behind."

"What about the other young men of your colony?" I asked. "How do they feel?"

"Most of them are content, as I said. And why shouldn't they be? The hardest work they were ever forced to do was to nurse at their mothers' breasts." He looked into my eyes. "You have offered them a dream, and they have accepted it."

"And what is *your* dream, Murumbi?"

He shrugged. "I have ceased to dream."

"I do not believe that," I said."Every man has a dream. What would it take to make you content?"

"Truly?"

"Truly."

"Let the Maasai come to Kirinyaga, or the Wakamba, or the Luo," he said. "I was trained to be a warrior. Therefore, give me a reason to carry my spear, to walk unfettered ahead of my wife when her back is bent under her burden. Let us raid their *shambas* and carry off their women and their cattle, and let them try to do the same for us. Do not *give* us new land to farm when we are old enough; let us *compete* for it with the other tribes."

"What you are asking for is war," I said.

"No," replied Murumbi. "What I am asking for is *meaning*. You mentioned my wife and children. I cannot afford the bride price for a wife, nor will I be able to unless my father dies and leaves me his cattle, or asks me to move back to his *shamba*." He stared at me with reproachful eyes. "Don't you realize that the only result is to make me wish for his charity or his death? It is far better to steal women from the Maasai."

"That is out of the question," I said. "Kirinyaga was created for the Kikuyu, as was the original Kirinyaga in Kenya."

"I know that is what we believe, just as the Maasai believe that Ngai created Kilimanjaro for them," said Murumbi. "But I have been thinking about it for many days, and do you know what *I* believe? I believe that the Kikuyu and Maasai were created for each other, for when we lived side by side in Kenya, each of us gave meaning and purpose to the other."

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"That is because you are not aware of Kenya's history," I said."The Maasai came down from the north only a century before the Europeans. They are nomads, wanderers, who follow their herds from one grazing area to another. The Kikuyu are farmers, who have always lived beside the holy mountain. We lived side by side with the Maasai for only a handful of years."

"Then bring us the Wakamba, or the Luo, or the Europeans!" he said, trying to control his frustration. "You still don't understand what I am saying. It is not the Maasai I want, it is the challenge!"

"And this is what Keino and Njupo and Nboka wanted?"

"Yes."

"And will you kill yourself, as they did, should a challenge not materialize?"

"I do not know. But I do not want to live a life filled with boredom."

"How many others in the colony of young men feel as you do?"

"Right now?" asked Murumbi. "Only myself." He paused and stared unblinking at me. "But there have been others before; there will be again."

"I do not doubt it," I replied with a heavy sigh. "Now that I understand the nature of the problem, I will return to my *boma* and think about how best to solve it."

"This problem is beyond your ability to solve, *mundumugu*," said Murumbi, "for it is part of the society that you have fought so hard to preserve."

"No problem is incapable of solution," I said.

"This one is," answered Murumbi with absolute conviction.

I left him standing there by the ashes, not totally convinced that he was wrong.

For three days I sat alone on my hill. I neither went into the village nor conferred with the Elders. When old Siboki needed more ointment for his pain, I sent Ndemi down the path with it, and when it was time to place new charms on the scarecrows, I instructed Ndemi to tend to the matter, for I was wrestling with a far more serious problem.

In some cultures, I knew, suicide was an honorable way of dealing with certain problems, but the Kikuyu did not belong to such a culture.

Furthermore, we had built a Utopia here, and to admit that suicides would occur from time to time meant that it was not a Utopia for all our people, which in turn meant that it was not a Utopia at all.

But we had built our Utopia along the lines of a traditional Kikuyu society, that which existed in Kenya before the advent of the Europeans. It was the Europeans who forcibly introduced change into that society,

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not the Kikuyu, and therefore I could not allow Murumbi to change the way we lived, either.

The most obvious answer was to encourage him—and others like him—to emigrate to Kenya, but this seemed out of the question. I myself had received higher degrees in both England and America, but the majority of Kikuyu on Kirinyaga had been those (considered fanatics by a Kenyan government that was glad to be rid of them) who had insisted on living in the traditional way prior to coming to Kirinyaga. This meant that not only could they not cope with the technology that permeated every layer of Kenyan society, but also that they did not even possess the tools to learn, for they could neither read nor write.

So Murumbi, and those who would surely follow him, could not leave Kirinyaga for Kenya or any other destination. That meant they must remain.

If they remained, there were only three alternatives that I could see, all of them equally unpalatable.

First, they could eventually give up in despair and kill themselves, as four of their young comrades had. This I could not permit.

Second, they could eventually adjust to the life of ease and idleness that was the lot of the Kikuyu male, and come to enjoy and defend it as passionately as did the other men of the village. This I could not foresee.

Third, I could take Murumbi's suggestion and open up the northern plains to the Maasai or the Wakamba, but this would make a mockery of all our efforts to establish Kirinyaga as a world for and of the Kikuyu. This I could not even consider, for I would not allow a war that would destroy *our* Utopia in order to create *his*.

For three days and three nights I searched for another alternative. On the morning of the fourth day, I emerged from my hut, my blanket wrapped tightly about me to protect me from the cold morning air, and lit my fire.

Ndemi was late, as usual. When he finally arrived, he was favoring his right foot, and explained that he had twisted it on his way up my hill—but I noticed, without surprise, that he limped on his left foot when he went off to fill my gourds with water.

When he returned, I watched him as he went about his duties, collecting firewood and removing fallen leaves from my *boma*. I had chosen him to be my assistant, and my eventual successor, because he was the boldest and brightest of the village children. It was Ndemi who always thought of new games for the others to play, and he himself was always the leader. When I would walk among them, he was the first to demand that I tell them a parable, and the quickest to understand the hidden meaning in it.

In short, he was a perfect candidate to commit suicide in a few more

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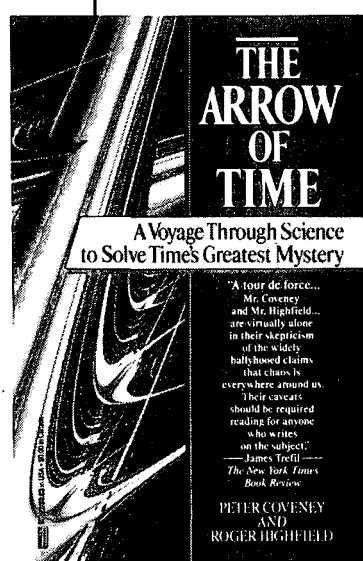
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years, had I not averted that possibility by encouraging him to become my assistant.

"Sit down, Ndemi," I said as he finished collecting the last of the leaves and throwing them on the dying embers of my fire.

He sat down next to me. "What will we study today, Koriba?" he asked.

"Today we will just talk," I said. His face fell, and I added, "I have a problem, and I am hoping that you will provide me with an answer to it."

Suddenly he was alert and enthused. "The problem is the young men who killed themselves, isn't it?" he said.

"That is correct," I answered him. "Why do you suppose they did it?"

He shrugged his scrawny shoulders. "I do not know, Koriba. Perhaps they were crazy."

"Do you really think so?"

He shrugged again. "No, not really. Probably an enemy has cursed them."

"Perhaps."

"It must be so," he said firmly. "Is not Kirinyaga a Utopia? Why else would anyone not wish to live here?"

"I want you to think back, Ndemi, to the days before you started coming to my *boma* every day."

"I can remember," he said. "It was not that long ago."

"Good," I replied. "Now, can you also remember what you wanted to do?"

He smiled. "To play. And to hunt."

I shook my head. "I do not mean what you wanted to do *then,*" I said. "Can you remember what you wanted to do when you were a man?"

He frowned. "Take a wife, I suppose, and start a *shamba.*"

"Why do you frown, Ndemi?" I asked.

"Because that is not really what I wanted," he replied. "But it was all I could think of to answer."

"Think harder," I said."Take as much time as you wish, for this is very important. I will wait."

We sat in silence for a long moment, and then he turned to me.

"I do not know. But I would not have wanted to live as my father and my brothers live."

"What *would* you have wanted?"

He shrugged helplessly. "Something different."

"Different in what way?"

"I do not know," he said again. "Something more . . ."—he searched for the word—"more *exciting.*" He considered his answer, then nodded, satisfied. "Even the impala grazing in the fields lives a more exciting life, for he must ever be wary of the hyena."

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"But wouldn't the impala rather that there were no hyenas?" I suggested.

"Of course," said Ndemi, "For then he could not be killed and eaten." He furrowed his brow in thought. "But if there were no hyenas, he would not need to be fleet of foot, and if he were no longer fleet of foot, he would no longer be an impala."

And with that, I began to see the solution.

"So it is the hyena that makes the impala what he is," I said. "And therefore, even something that seems to be a bad or dangerous thing can be necessary to the impala."

He stared at me. "I do not understand, Koriba."

"I think that I must become a hyena," I said thoughtfully.

"Right now?" asked Ndemi excitedly. "May I watch?"

I shook my head. "No, not right now. But soon."

For if it was the threat of the hyena that defined the impala, then I had to find a way to define those young men who had ceased to be true Kikuyu and yet could not leave Kirinyaga.

"Will you have spots and legs and a tail?" asked Ndemi eagerly.

"No," I replied. "But I will be a hyena nonetheless."

"I do not understand," said Ndemi.

"I do not expect you to," I said. "But Murumbi will."

For I realized that what he needed was a challenge that could be provided by only one person on Kirinyaga.

And that person was myself.

I sent Ndemi to the village to tell Koinnage that I wanted to address the Council of Elders. Then, later that day, I put on my ceremonial headdress, painted my face to look its most frightening, and, filling my pouch with various charms, I made my way to the village, where Koinnage had assembled all the Elders in his *boma*. I waited patiently for him to announce that I had important matters to discuss with them—for even the *mundumugu* may not speak before the paramount chief—and then I got to my feet and faced them.

"I have cast the bones," I said."I have read the entrails of a goat, and I have studied the pattern of the flies on a newly dead lizard. And now I know why Ngala walked unarmed among the hyenas, and why Keino and Njupo died."

I paused for dramatic effect, and made sure that I had everyone's attention.

"Tell us who caused the *thahu,*" said Koinnage, "that we may destroy him."

"It is not that simple," I answered. "Hear me out. The carrier of the *thahu* is Murumbi."

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"I will kill him!" cried Kibanja, who had been Ngala's father. "He is the reason my son is dead!"

"No," I said. "You must not kill him, for he is not the source of the *thahu*. He is merely the carrier."

"If a cow drinks poisoned water, she is not the source of her bad milk, but we must kill her anyway," insisted Kibanja.

"It is not Murumbi's fault," I said firmly. "He is as innocent as your own son, and he must not be killed."

"Then who *is* responsible for the *thahu?*" demanded Kibanja. "I will have blood for my son's blood!"

"It is an old *thahu,* cast upon us by a Maasai back when we still lived in Kenya," I said. "He is dead now, but he was a very clever *mundumugu,* for his *thahu* lives on long after him." I paused. "I have fought him in the spirit world, and most of the time I have won, but once in a while my magic is weak, and on those occasions the *thahu* is visited upon one of our young men."

"How can we know which of our young men bears the *thahu?*" asked Koinnage. "Must we wait for them to die before we know they have been cursed?"

"There are ways," I answered. "But they are known only to myself. When I have finished telling you what you must do, I will visit all the other villages and seek out the colonies of young men to see if any of them also bears the *thahu.*"

"Tell us what we must do," said old Siboki, who had come to hear me despite the pain in his joints.

"You will not kill Murumbi," I repeated, "for it is not his fault that he carries this *thahu.* But we do not want him passing it to others, so from this day forward he is an outcast. He must be driven from his hut and never allowed back. Should any of you offer him food or shelter, the same *thahu* will befall you and your families. I want runners sent to all the nearby villages, so that by tomorrow morning they all know that he must be shunned, and I want them in turn to send out still more runners, so that within three days no village on Kirinyaga will welcome him."

"That is a terrible punishment," said Koinnage, for the Kikuyu are a compassionate people. "If the *thahu* is not his fault, can we not at least set food out for him at the edge of the village? Perhaps if he comes alone by night, and sees and speaks to no one else, the *thahu* will remain with him alone."

I shook my head. "It must be as I say, or I cannot promise that the *thahu* will not spread to all of you."

"If we see him in the fields, can we not acknowledge him?" persisted Koinnage.

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"If you see him, you must threaten him with your spears and drive him away," I answered.

Koinnage sighed deeply. "Then it shall be as you say. We will drive him from his hut today, and we will shun him forever."

"So be it," I said, and left the *boma* to return to my hill.

All right, Murumbi, I thought. *Now you have your challenge. You have been raised never to use the spear; now you will eat only what your spear can kill. You have been raised to let your women build your huts; now you will be safe from the elements only in those huts that you yourself build. You have been raised to live a life of ease; now you will live only by your wits and your energies. No one will help you, no one will give you food or shelter, and I will not rescind my order. It is not a perfect solution, but it is the best I can contrive under the circumstances. You needed a challenge and an enemy; now I have provided you with both.*

I visited every village on Kirinyaga during the next month, and spent much time speaking to the young men. I found two more who had to be driven out and forced to live in the wilderness, and now, along with my other duties, such visits have become part of my regular schedule.

There have been no more suicides, and no more unexplained deaths among our young men. But from time to time I cannot help wondering what must become of a society, even a Utopia such as Kirinyaga, where our best and our brightest are turned into outcasts, and all that remains are those who are content to eat the fruit of the lotus. ●

TIME-WINDS

Out of the crush
of colliding galaxies
the time-winds gust, swirling
through dustclouds and gas
like dry leaves, piling up
drifts of new stars, but oh,
a bitter and wintry wind
relativistic and wild
that keens through the mountains
of hope, blunting and rounding—
do you remember? bleak days
before the too-honest mirror? days
when you know how old you are
all of a sudden?—and even
your Rockies are changed,
changed utterly, without
your notice, and you stand
alone in flat desert, weeping
into the wrinkles of sand.

—David Lunde

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Tom Purdom is a music critic for "Philadelphia's best read weekly newspaper" who is noted for his "peculiar tendency to enjoy the stuff he reviews." His love and appreciation for music clearly inspired this lyrical . . .

CHAMBER STORY

by Tom Purdom

Nowadays Mark and Genine usually play Schubert when they play together. Genine has abandoned the flute and taken up the violin—a switch that kept her out of circulation, musically, for almost five months—and they now end half their weekly rendezvous with Schubert's trio in B flat for piano, violin, and cello. Usually it's the last thing they play. They sometimes think about playing it at the beginning of a session, but they always decide, in the end, to leave it for last. Sometimes—if they must have something like the B flat trio right at the beginning—they start with one of Brahms' trios for the same instruments. The cool, serene works produced by contemporary composers have their attractions, too. So do some of the wild, frenzied things, like Shostakovich's second piano trio, that entered the repertoire in the late twentieth century.

For Mark and Genine, however, Shostakovich and Brahms and the detached serenity of their own segment of the twenty-first century are only detours. They both know what they really want. . . .

The first time Mark had played with Genine, they had been the guests of a surgeon who lured playing partners to his apartment with marvelous buffets embellished with wine fountains. Genine had only been playing with other people for four months but she already had the true chamber

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musician's feel for the give and take that makes the different parts of a composition work together. Mark had only been playing with her for an hour when he decided he would never have to be afraid she would throw in some flamboyant ornaments or raise the volume or the tempo of her own part and distort the entire structure her partners were trying to erect.

She was a joy to watch, too. She wore simple, solid-colored clothes that set off her dark skin tones and her slender, athletic body and she never went in for the body language so many flutists seem to feel they have to indulge in. She just stood there, playing her instrument, and let the music and the natural gracefulness of a person who was concentrating on her work create an effect that was a hundred times more impressive than a lot of eye rolling and hip wiggling would have been. There had been something particularly elegant, Mark had felt, about the way the surgeon tipped his violin toward Genine as he introduced a new theme and she rose a little as she responded.

Mark wouldn't have even *looked* at a page by Schubert in those days. His instrument of choice had been the viola da gamba—the older relative of the cello—and the only music that had interested him had been the music composed between the birth of Leonardo da Vinci and the death of Bach. The music of the Baroque and the Renaissance, he liked to tell people, was the perfect music for the world Ravashani and his cohorts had created when they put the first crude performance systems on the market. Now that music was no longer a spectator art, Mark had argued, now that almost anyone could be a skilled musician, people needed music that was originally written for the pleasure of the musicians. In the years before 1750, most of the thousands of pieces composed for small ensembles hadn't been written for public performance in front of an audience. They had been composed for the musicians themselves, for highly skilled people from the aristocracy and the upper bourgeoisie who played for their own enjoyment, in the privacy of their homes and castles.

Mark had a lot of thoughts about music then. It had only been four years since Ravashani's successors had produced information molecules that could be installed in the human body without expensive surgery. Mark and Genine were part of the army of people who had grabbed at performance systems with the heady enthusiasm previous generations had bestowed on semi-anthropomorphic robots and nerve-linked entertainment modules. Mark was a medical social worker by profession; for most of his life he had been one of those dedicated personalities who proudly tell themselves (and others) that they are interested in *people,* not abstract things like musical notes or cold inhuman things like technology. Genine had been a partner in three different business ventures in the last nine years; this was almost the first time in her life she had

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been caught up in something that didn't involve dollars and cents. She had envied people who could play instruments ever since she had been a teenager, but she had always shrugged and assumed a whole side of her personality would always be neglected. And then one weekend—when she had realized her latest enterprise had reached a point where she could explore the world of leisure and pleasure—she had crept into a music store and come out four hours later with a performance system installed in her nervous system and a case with a silver flute clutched in her hand. And five months later, she had found herself standing in her living room transforming air and metal into music.

Genine had stayed behind with the surgeon when the party broke up, but Mark had detected no indications they had a permanent liaison. He lit up the primary screen on his information system as soon as he got home and immediately had the system sort through all his invitations to musical gatherings and send affirmatives to anyone who had indicated Genine would be one of the other players present. Then he transmitted notes to three of his regular partners and let them know he thought a flutist named Genine Moraine would be an excellent addition to any ensembles they happened to be putting together. Within a week he had played with another foursome that included Genine. Within three weeks he was seeing her almost every other evening.

Sometimes Genine stayed behind with someone like the surgeon and Mark went home with someone like one of the harpsichordists he frequently played with. Sometimes they left together. Sometimes they strolled into the night as part of a foursome or a sixsome and separated at some street corner, with a pat or a squeeze of the hand, as they each went off with someone else. Sometimes they just talked on the phone or got together in a coffee and pastry place on a Sunday morning. And always there was the music—the stately flow of the saraband the measured lilt of a minuet, the good humored buoyancy of a bourree, the carefully crafted beauty of a well-played slow movement. Their leisure hours were a continuous ballet—a ballet in which the participants danced with fingers and bows and the keys and valves of the wind instruments.

And wasn't the music they played an appropriate accompaniment to the other delights that adorned their evenings and weekends? Mark had never been much of a history student, but it was his understanding that the aristocrats of the Baroque era had frequently taken a light-hearted attitude toward their sexual relationships. He had never spoken to a Duc de This or a Chevalier de That, but he was quite certain they would have agreed with him that sexual pleasure didn't have to be accompanied by intense feelings or total commitment to another human being. In the era in which their chosen music had been composed, Mark and Genine

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concurred, there had been a general agreement that *l'amour*—like music—was primarily a form of *plaisir*.

Joe Baske was lying on his back the first time Mark saw him. He was surrounded by the usual assortment of machines, screens, bottles, and tubes, and there was a tall woman sitting by his head. The woman had both hands on Baske's shoulders when Mark entered the room and her hands stayed in contact with Baske's body the entire time Mark was "dialoguing" with the patient.

Mark always screened the standard news accounts before he talked to the victim of an accident and it hadn't been hard to fill in the details the news peddlers had obviously been encouraged to omit. The woman was the wife of the Commissioner of Parks—a notably well-to-do gentleman whose opinions on which politician should be elected mayor were of some importance to the citizens who aspired to that office. Baske had apparently been enjoying an interlude in the Commissioner's house when the Commissioner had come home earlier than expected—perhaps on purpose. Baske had escaped on his motorcycle, the Commissioner had pursued him with his headlights beating on Baske's shoulders, Baske had gone speeding down a street he wasn't familiar with, and a defect in the road surface had caught him by surprise. Baske's spinal cord had been

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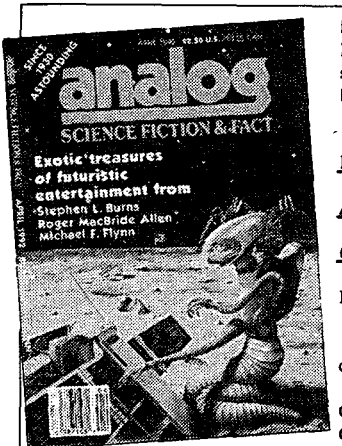

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severed just below the middle of his back and he was paralyzed from the waist down.

As the medical social worker assigned to Baske's case, Mark was the hospital representative who had to tell the patient he was faced with a lengthy, extremely unpleasant ordeal. It would be five weeks before Baske's spinal cord would be fully regenerated. For the first three weeks of that interlude, Baske was going to have to lie flat on his back, with his torso rigidly immobilized by a plastic and aluminum cage.

As it turned out, Baske took the news of his forthcoming medical incarceration rather well. Baske's round, puggish face had been grinning in most of the pictures the local newsmongers had been able to dig up, and he managed to produce a thin, bravely wry smile when Mark gave him the gruesome details. Overall, he was one of the liveliest and least depressed patients Mark had ever encountered. His extended-care room had become a major social center by the time he had been in the hospital three days. His wheelchair never stopped rolling once his three weeks of immobility ended. Staff people stopped being surprised when they found him hanging around a piece of equipment asking questions. Elderly women happily told Mark about the hours they had spent discussing violin technique with that "lively young man."

Genine sometimes visited the hospital and played with the patients when she had a free afternoon. She made one of her visits during Baske's last week in the hospital and found the elderly flutist she was going to play with talking to Baske in a common room. The older flutist supplemented her retirement income by trading currencies, it seemed, and Baske's major means of support was the profits he collected trading bond futures in the Indian and Central European capital markets.

Genine and the other flutist both smiled when Baske asked if he could listen to them. There were still people around who just listened to other people play, but there weren't many of them, and most musicians found them a bit odd.

"It's going to be a pretty dry session," Genine said. "We're going to go over one sonata from the middle of the French Baroque—one movement, really—and just keep playing it over and over trying out different types of ornamentation."

Mark had agreed to accompany them on the gamba and he kept expecting to see Baske dozing in his wheelchair every time he took his eyes off his music stand. Instead, Baske spent most of a full hour watching the two women as if they were outlining a scheme that would divert every loose piece of change in the Indian and Central European capital markets into his personal bank account. He didn't slip out of the room until three minutes before he was supposed to start a session with the rehab specialists.

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* * *

Two days later Genine found a message from Baske on her information system. He was going to be celebrating his release from the hospital a week from Thursday and he had noticed the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra was giving a concert in Boston that included one of the Mozart flute concertos. If he booked a private room on the train that left at five thirty, they could have a very nice dinner en route—he would arrange to have it privately catered—and still be in Boston in time for the concert. . . .

Genine stared at the face on the screen as if it had popped out of another dimension. She was already booked up for the night in question—and almost every night after that for the next month—and she made it a point to let Baske know she hardly ever *listened* to music. When she wanted to watch a pro and pick up pointers, she normally viewed a recording at her own convenience.

"That still sounds like a pretty nice way to spend an evening," Mark said. "A catered dinner on the Wheelless Wonder might tempt me into canceling an evening with my little bow, if some happy-go-lucky futures trader held it in front of me."

"I'm afraid I've already got all the people in my life one human being can accommodate. There's even one or two I actually enjoy seeing."

"But how many of them would offer to spend a small fortune on your entertainment after listening to you play the same adagio fifteen times?"

"I think I'd just as soon spend my time with someone who's willing to saw away on his over-sized fiddle while I play the same adagio fifteen times. Especially when he's somebody who's a nice height and doesn't get himself paralyzed chasing after the wives of people who have more power than anybody should have."

The door slid open half a second after Mark positioned himself in front of the camera. A robot with impressively sleek joints guided him into a living room and he found himself staring at a small harpsichord decorated with the gold and rust trimming favored by one of the best known harpsichord builders of the early twenty-first century. One of his favorite harpsichordists was already sitting in front of it, with Joe Baske beaming down at her as she ran the tips of her fingers over the keys.

"It's a real John Stuart harpsichord!" the harpsichordist said. "This is the first time I've ever even touched one, Mark. Listen to it."

She launched into the first section of one of Bach's French suites and Baske's smile broadened. Mark listened to the rippling, feathery quality of the harpsichord's tone and automatically began to think about how it would sound with his instrument. Baske turned toward him with a strange tense look on his face and he realized Genine had entered the apartment and stopped behind him.

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Baske scuttled across the room to a side table and lifted a violin and a bow out of a case that had been lying open. He stopped for a moment to check the tuning and then stepped toward Genine playing a slow movement that sounded as if it came from a sonata by Corelli.

Mark stared. The violin itself was obviously a marvel, but that didn't account for the sounds flowing out of its strings. The best violin in the world was only a box in the wrong hands.

"Are you sure you didn't know anything about music when I met you in the hospital?" Mark said.

Baske reached a cadence that made a natural stopping place and finished up with a lengthy, self-satirizing trill on the next-to-last note. The harpsichordist smiled and clapped her hands, and Baske presented her with a goodhumored salute with his bow and a muted, slightly sweetened version of the pug-dog grin Mark had seen in the news stories he had screened after the accident.

"I'm afraid I have to confess I took unfair advantage of the fact that I work in a lazy man's profession," Baske said. "It's amazing how much faster you can move when you can put in a little more time with your tutoring program than the instruction manuals claim most people do."

"That was still a pretty impressive performance for someone who's only been studying for two months," Genine said. "I know people who've been at it for a couple of years who still have trouble playing that movement with all the ornaments."

Baske grinned again. His bow swept around the room in a gesture that was so exuberant—and careless—it made Mark take a step back.

"What do you think of the way this room sounds, Genine? I got rid of a big thick rug and had these floors refinished just last month. The walls still have a lot more stuff on them than I'd like but I had an acoustics expert in here, too, and we made some modifications that should improve the sound."

A chair and a music stand had been placed near the harpsichord for Mark. Two other stands had been adjusted to standing height and placed the way Mark liked them—so they faced the harpsichord and the gamba player's chair. They would play *at* each other, in true Baroque fashion, and not pretend they were performing for an imaginary audience.

Mark plopped himself in front of his music stand and began unpacking his instrument while he watched Baske show Genine around the apartment. He raised his eyebrows at the harpsichordist and she smiled and gave him a little palms-up shrug.

"It is a bit overwhelming," the harpsichordist murmured.

"A *little* more time. He must have been practicing eight hours a day."

"He told me it was twelve and up. He didn't pinch any pennies when he bought his system either, apparently."

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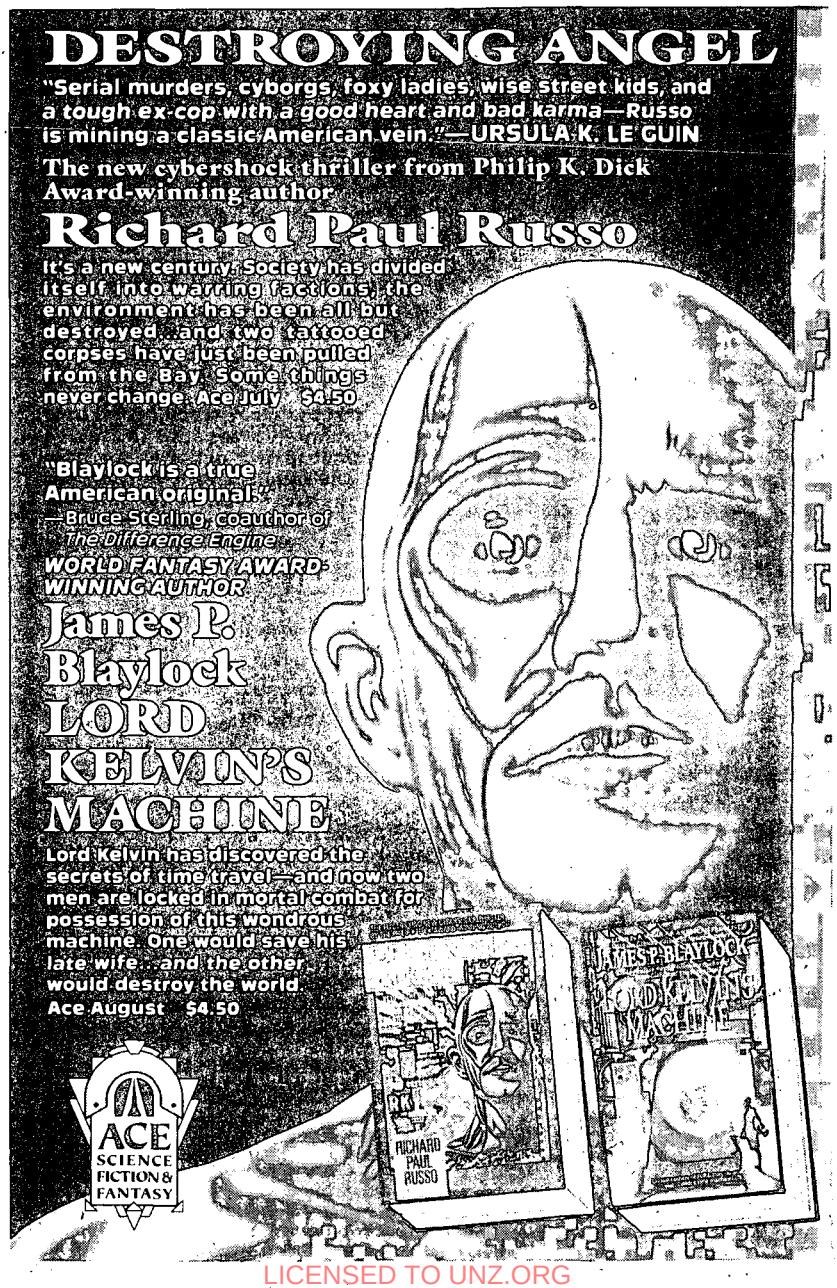

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Mark shook his head and started easing his bow across the strings as he checked the tuning on his gamba. Contrary to what many people seemed to think, performance systems were not magical devices that totally eliminated the need for work. Most people practiced one or two hours a day, several times a week, and took about six months to reach the point where they could start playing socially. Mark had purchased a moderately priced system—a common beginner's mistake—and the third finger of his left hand had given him three weeks of frustrating problems. The tutoring program that had come with his system hadn't been a masterpiece of pedagogy either. It had taken him almost eight months to reach the point where he could play with other people—and there had been a number of times when he had wondered if he was one of those rare creatures who was doomed to remain earthbound in spite of all the funny molecules Ravashani and his fellow wizards could produce in their laboratories.

"He says he did it for her," the harpsichordist murmured. "For Genine."

"For Genine?"

"He says he realized she only spent her leisure time with people who played. So . . .

"He doesn't even know her. He only saw her once. At the hospital. For about an hour. The only contacts he's had with her since then are a couple of phone messages."

"But *there she was!*" the harpsichordist said, moving her hands in expressive circles and somehow managing to mimic Baske's enthusiasm without raising her voice. "So *straight*. So *tall*. So *fully in command of her instrument*."

Baske was hurrying toward them with a stack of scores in his hands. Behind him, Genine was bending over a table and pulling her flute out of its case. "I hope you don't mind if we just plunge right in," Baske said. "I'm not going to be happy until I prove I really can do this with other people."

Mark glanced at the title on the score Baske had placed on his music stand and realized he was looking at one of the pieces he had played with Genine the evening they had first met—a trio sonata by Couperin that really shouldn't be played by someone who hadn't spent some time studying French Baroque styles. The score right under it contained the bass line for a Handel trio sonata that required an entirely different type of stylistic expertise.

The harpsichordist hit half a dozen a's and the familiar sound of two strings and a flute tuning up had its usual effect on him. Baske hovered nervously over his stand while Mark made some last minute adjustments. Then he tucked his violin under his chin and looked around.

The trio sonata was the major chamber music form of the Baroque. It

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was called a trio because it was written for three voices, but it required four musicians because one of the voices—the accompaniment—was supposed to be played by two instruments. Essentially, the flute and the violin would play a duet, while Mark and the harpsichordist provided an accompaniment, with Mark playing the bass line and the gentle plucking of the harpsichord filling in the harmonies.

In practice, of course, it wasn't that simple. The trills and shakes and other elaborations the gamba player added to the bass line were left up to his own taste. The harpsichordist didn't just play clunky harmonies one after the other; she was expected to break up the chords, add expressive touches, and generally improvise an accompaniment that would weave appropriately selected threads through the entire tapestry. And the flutist and the violinist were, of course, supposed to apply all their knowledge of bowing, ornamentation, breathing, and other technical matters to the printed score and create something that was tasteful and expressive.

When it worked, when everybody knew what they were doing, four people found themselves living in a magical land where human beings sang with the kind of voices they wished they had been born with, and treated each other with the utmost courtesy, gallantry, and taste. When it didn't work, when one of the players still hadn't learned the subtleties of the dance, it had all the charm of a committee meeting in which everyone felt they had to say something and no one had the slightest idea where they were going.

Baroque scores were a lot like ancient religious texts. Every score was surrounded by commentaries—and commentaries on the commentaries—churned out by scholars who had delved into the complexities of eighteenth century performance practice and all the other matters you had to understand if you were going to turn the bare, uninformative notes on the page into real music. Musicians normally absorbed the results of all that Talmudic scholarship by watching recordings of master classes by musicians and musicologists and pooling their knowledge with the other people they played with. Mark had spent most of his free time glued in front of a screen when he had first started playing and he still felt overwhelmed whenever he sorted through the educational memory banks in search of offerings that might be worth his while.

Mark brought his bow down on his a string and produced the opening note Couperin had heard in his mind in the days when Louis XIV had been the beau ideal of Europe. The harpsichordist joined in as she had done a hundred times before and then—smoothly, exactly as they should have—the first notes of that incredible violin resonated in the room's acoustics. Baske turned toward Genine as he played the opening theme; Genine repeated the theme back at him in the lighter, silvery tones of

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the flute; and Baske launched into a long, heavily ornamented passage while his partner's instrument trilled and murmured under him. There was a small moment of confusion and then Mark's hands began responding with the kind of ornaments and stylistic devices he would have used if he had been playing with one of the more experienced players he encountered on his rounds.

The movement ended on a cheery little fillip by the flute and the violin. Three heads turned toward Baske. "That—was *very good,*" the harpsichordist drawled. "*Extremely* good."

Genine nodded in agreement. They started the slow movement and Mark once again found himself settling into the music as if he were backing up a veteran. By the time they were ready to begin the final allegro, Genine had risen to the occasion and started playing with a verve and exuberance that would have made half the musicians Mark knew feel like applauding.

"That's amazing," Genine said. "I've never seen anybody pick up that style that fast. That's almost like learning a whole language overnight."

"I had a very good teacher," Baske said modestly. "It's really the teaching you're hearing."

"You hired a style teacher?" the harpsichordist said. "Along with all the time and money you put into the basic stuff?"

Genine frowned. Baske glanced at her out of the corner of his eyes—almost shyly, Mark thought—and then flipped the pages of his score with his bow hand. "Was the way I handled that bit right after the twentieth bar in the slow movement all right, Mark? I'm still not quite sure I understand what Couperin wanted right there."

Mark turned away from his desk and gave the information system the little wave that let it know he was through with it for the movement. "Emmet Fitzgibbon's minimum teaching rate is listed at three fifty an hour. And there's no telling what he'd charge somebody who wanted to be jumped ahead on his waiting list. Joe must have spent every dollar he's earned for the last three months."

"It is kind of flattering," Genine said. "It's a bit much—but I do have to admit it's flattering."

"I take it Rachel told you about the conversation she and Joe had before we got there."

"Actually Joe told me the same thing when he was showing me around his apartment. He just touched on it lightly when he was talking to me—like he was making a little joke—but it sounds like she thought he meant it."

"Well, at least he's getting some genuine musical ability out of it."

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"It's mad, it's glorious, it's hilarious."—*Locus*

TERRY PRATCHETT

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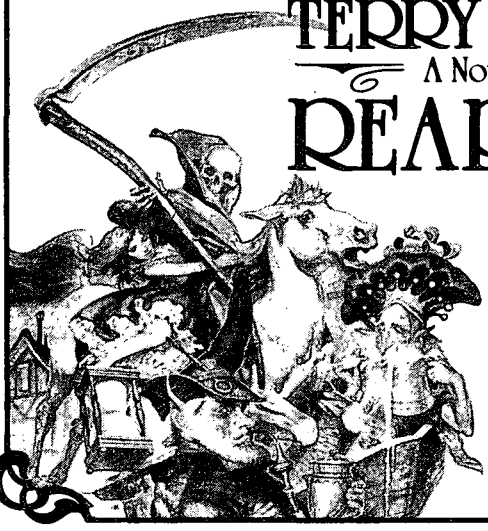

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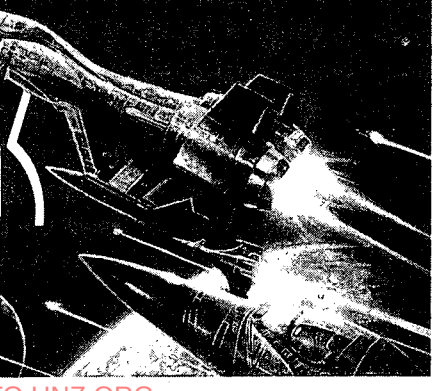
By R.M. MELUCH



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"It still seems like a lot of trouble to go to just to be in the same social circle one particular member of the opposite sex happens to belong to."

Genine had already slipped out of her shoes and stretched across the big square bed Mark had bought when he had first become a self-supporting adult—a playground on which his partners had originally been young women from his own professional milieu who had a noticeable tendency to advise him they considered sex a form of communication. The light on the side of the bed was bringing out the lines of her face in a way he particularly liked and he stopped for a moment in the middle of the room and let himself savor the effect. Two nights ago he had been in Rachel's apartment. The night before that he had snatched some time with an oboist who was even more elegant, in some ways, than Genine. Had anyone ever had everything he had—and with someone like Genine as part of it?

They left the apartment in a quartet—Baske with Genine, Mark with a coltish young bass player who pushed her instrument along in a wheeled case. Bass players usually played with groups that went in for music from later periods, but tonight they had been giving themselves a workout with a host whose tastes ran to stuff like Vivaldi concertos and Bach's second orchestral suite. Genine was looking particularly flushed. The solo flute part in the Bach suite was one of the mountain tops in her repertoire and she had led them through the whole piece in a way that had made everyone there feel as if they were spending forty minutes in direct contact with the spirit of the man who had written it.

The bass player was talking—softly but enthusiastically—about the things she loved in Bach's handling of counterpoint. They left Joe and Genine at a corner across the street from a park and Mark noticed they were holding hands as they stepped into the shadows under the trees. A couple of minutes later he heard a violin playing in the park.

"I've already promised Joe that evening, Mark. He's got a place by the river he wants to show me."

"Then how about Tuesday? We're both playing at Rachel's then."

"Can I give you an answer later? Can I let you know on Sunday?"

"It's been three weeks since you and I spent any time together alone, Genine."

"I realize that, Mark. It's been bothering me, too."

"I understand Joe is somebody new. I've been through that myself. But you shouldn't forget the rest of us still need to see you some, too. I didn't stop seeing you when Sonya came along, did I?"

"I know it's been a while, Mark. I think about it all the time. He's just

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a little hard to resist right now. It'll blow over sooner or later. It isn't like I'm leaving you isolated."

Normally Mark only screened the stories filed by the standard news agencies. Now he sat down in front of his information system and spent some money on the stories the freelance gossip merchants had stored in the news banks.

Baske's adventure with the Commissioner's wife wasn't his first encounter with the political structure. One of the most controversial freelancers in the city was a woman whose face always indicated there was more to her story than the facts she was recounting. There was some reason to think Baske had left Chicago, she implied in one of her stories, because another powerful politician had almost lost *her* husband when she had let herself succumb to Baske's persuasions.

That particular freelancer had speculated that Baske was attracted to dangerous, powerful people and let it go at that. Like most of the other journalists who had paid attention to the story, she had assumed her viewers were primarily interested in Commissioner Haynes and his reactions. One of the more obscure freelancers had decided to focus on Baske instead and she had run down two of his Chicago acquaintances who seemed to feel it was a wonder he hadn't spent more time in hospitals.

"He just tends to go crazy," a currency trader said. "He gets fixated on one person and just pours everything he has into the relationship—money, time—everything. It happens to him all the time."

"Would he be willing to anger a very powerful man when he's in one of these moods?"

"From what I've seen, I think I'd be willing to say he'd do almost anything. He doesn't make a big fuss about it—he doesn't get all wild eyed and spend all his time talking about it—but after you've known him a while you suddenly begin to realize you're seeing the same thing over and over."

"Have you noticed if there's any particular type of woman who seems to set him off?"

"Not really. I think I've only actually met three of them. They were all people I enjoyed meeting but I honestly couldn't see anything else they had in common—they weren't blonde or brunette, or particularly round, or tall, or anything like that. I really haven't got the slightest idea what's behind the way he behaves. I know a lot of people who know him who've got theories about him, but I haven't heard one yet that really makes sense."

"Are you awake?" Rachel whispered.

"I'm sorry. Did I wake you up?"

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"Is something bothering you, Mark?"

"I'm just having trouble sleeping. I probably should get up and read a nice exciting paper on post-surgical counseling."

"How about a little post-coital auditory receptivity? I can stay awake if you think that would do any good."

"I'll be all right."

"You've been looking a trifle preoccupied lately."

He patted her leg a couple of times and then gave her shoulders an affectionate squeeze. "Why don't we try a little post-coital snuggling? I've never had it fail me yet."

I'm in love with him, Genine had said. It's the only terminology I can use, she had said. I'm in love with him. He's in love with me. I thought it was something you only heard about in books and videos. But it does happen—people really feel this way.

Mark had never seen her glow the way she had been glowing then. Every photon in the solar system could have been radiating from the screen.

"It just makes everything different," Genine said. "It isn't just him. It's the way we feel about each other. It makes everything you do different when you feel that way about the other person."

"And the rest of us are just supposed to go away? And let Joe have you all to himself?"

"It's my life, Mark. It's my time."

"And how about him? Didn't he feel this way about Commissioner Haynes's wife, too? The last time she visited him in the hospital he was looking at her like she was the only woman in the world. And he'd already met you and suggested you take that trip to Boston."

"We've already gone over all that. He doesn't play games. No one is claiming this is going to last forever. He's in love with me. He wants to spend every minute he can with me. But he knows himself well enough to know it never lasts. It's a real feeling but it never lasts. It's something you have to learn to enjoy while it's there."

"And that's how you feel about him? You want to spend every minute you can with him?"

"For now—yes."

Mark pushed himself away from his console and trudged down the hall to an appointment with a patient who was scheduled to die that afternoon. The patient was a toxic waste engineer who had taken up the violin in his early nineties and he had asked a harpsichordist and a young gamba player to join him in his room. For almost two hours, while Mark listened appreciatively, the engineer and his two partners played

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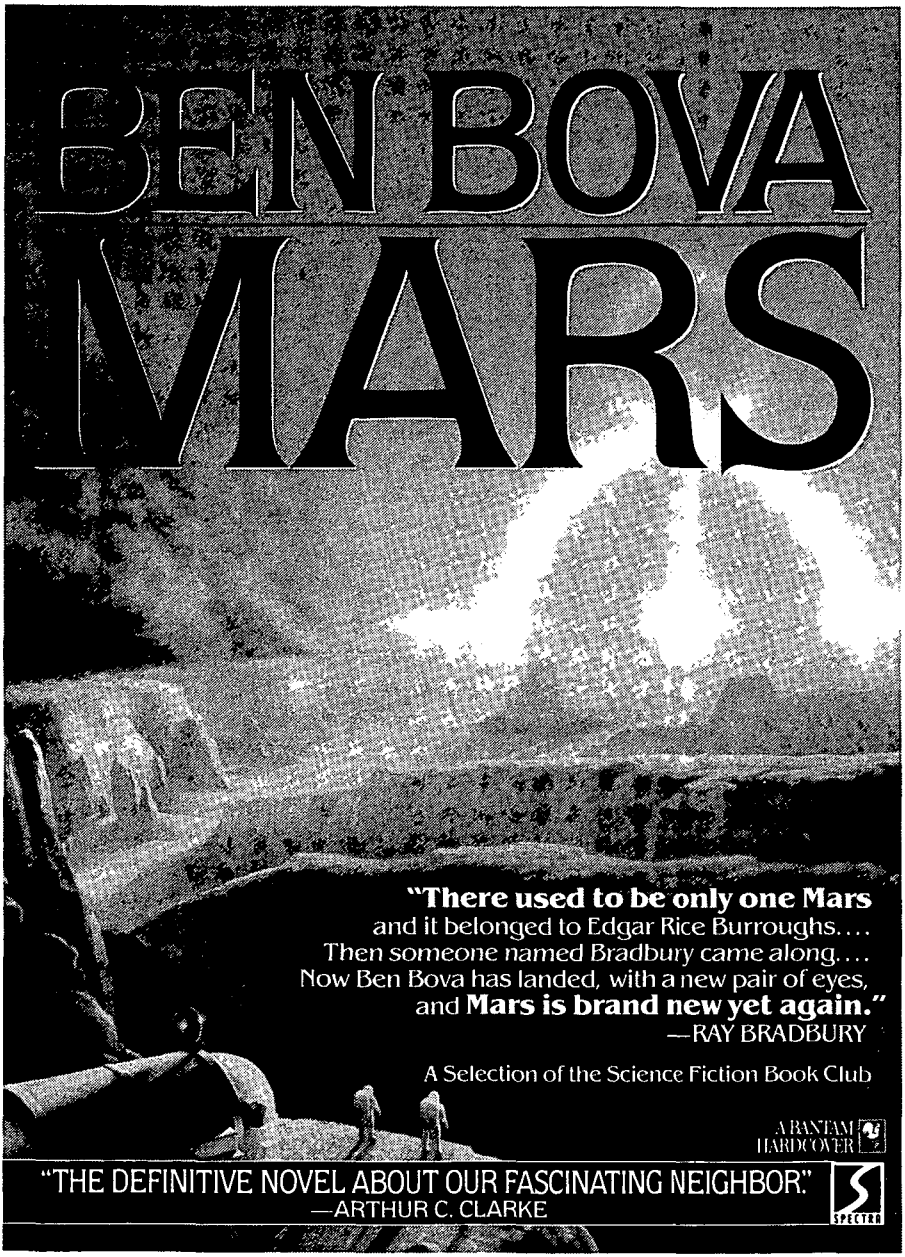
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some rousing stuff by Vivaldi and then followed it with three funny pieces by Telemann that made the gamba player smile every time the music reached a climax. At quarter to three, only a few minutes later than he had planned it, the engineer put his violin under his chin for the last time and spent the final twenty minutes of his life playing one of Bach's unaccompanied sonatas. He laid his violin across the bedclothes, Mark handed him the goblet, and he tipped a toast at the other two musicians and raised the rim to his mouth while they were all still reacting to the way he had played the Bach. The last thing the engineer saw was the gamba player tapping the strings with her bow as she gave him a small approving smile.

It had been Mark's elderly patients who had first made him feel there might be more to life than the development of his "inter-personal skills." The elderly were about the only people who had to stay in the hospital for any length of time these days and the "post-retirement" patients who had equipped themselves with performance systems always wanted to know if they could bring their instruments with them.

At first he had seen the whole thing as an interesting clinical phenomenon—an example of the way the interplay between technology and human feelings can affect the way people cope with illness. "The truth is I was just as specialized and lop-sided as the most fanatic engineer on the medical staff," he had told Genine the first time they got to talking about themselves. "I even used to keep track of the number of minutes it took me to size up a patient's anxieties. And my feelings about the arts weren't much better. The visual arts were just something I'd studied in school so I could get my degree. I thought I liked music but it was really just something I used as a background noise."

Genine had nodded in a way that let him know she had felt similar things herself and started talking about her own personal renaissance with an enthusiasm that had made half the people in the restaurant smile when they heard her. Mark could see every emotion that had passed across her face as he hurried through the corridors to his next appointment.

"It's only an interlude," Baske said. "Eventually she'll come back to you and your friends. There's no reason why you should get upset. Genine places a very high value on her relationship with you. Eventually, it will be just like she'd been away on a trip."

"And you'll go on and 'fall in love' with someone else . . ."

"It's the way I am, Mark. It's something I found out about myself when I was very young. I'm not like you—I can't just find four or five I'm friendly with and be happy with just that. I'm not that rational. I seem

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to have this capacity for falling in love. I want a particular person—only her. No one else will do. It doesn't even matter *why* they make me want them. Usually it's their faces—the things their faces seem to tell me about them—but sometimes it's a talent, sometimes it's just the total of everything, the way she looks, the way she acts, the things she does, the way it is this time. It doesn't matter. The important thing is the fact that they evoke that feeling."

"And what does Loretta Haynes think now that you've transferred your enthusiasm to Genine? Is she enjoying whatever her dear husband is probably putting her through?"

"I try not to be irresponsible. I realize there's some things you shouldn't do no matter how you feel. I almost managed to turn my back on that one, in fact. And I'm not sure it's as terrible as you think. She's a clever, very attractive woman—her husband has feelings that don't always show up on the video screens. It wasn't a minor thing for her, either. Women like being desired that way, Mark. They like feeling there's someone in the world who feels they're the only person on Earth who can possibly satisfy him—someone who feels they're so incredibly attractive and desirable he'll take almost any risk for them. I always tell them it's only for a while. I have ever since the first two or three times, when I understood it. There's been some things I'm not happy about—things I don't even want to talk about. But I think, for most of them, it's been something that's been worth whatever trouble it caused them."

"And of course it hasn't been a bad life for you."

"It's the way I am. Most of the time it's harmless—something more intense, something that adds some enchantment to things that really aren't that different from the things they do with other people. It's the way I am. Money, work, most of the things people do for pleasure—they don't mean a thing to me unless there's someone I'm in love with at the center of it all."

Baske smiled. "Of course, now I have music. I suspect I'm going to like having that."

"You've got Rachel," Genine said. "You've got Bonnie. There's probably six others I haven't even heard of. You're not dying of loneliness. Why can't you just treat it like I'm away on a trip for a while? That's all it is."

"That's what Joe said."

"Well, he's right. I understand you miss me, Mark. We've had some tremendous times together. I'd feel the same way if you slipped away for a while. But it's not the end of the world. Do you think I'd be putting pressure on you like this if the situation was reversed? Would you like

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it if I were calling you up and making you feel like you had some kind of obligation to me?"

Mark took a deep breath—a discipline that kicked in at work whenever he heard certain tones and realized he had to stop and feel his way into another person's emotions.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to make you feel that way."

"I'm sorry if I sounded angry. I just—it's just that this is a very nice thing. It's easy to get so wrapped up in it you forget everything else. And then when you call up . . . and I realize I've been so totally involved in it I've been neglecting every other relationship I've got. It's just incredible, that's all. I've never felt anything like this before. Everything you do glows like somebody's touched it with a magic wand."

"Are you really sure it isn't just that you like having someone feel that way about you?" Mark said. "He likes the way he feels when he lets his whole life focus on one person. You like having someone feel that way about you. Isn't that what you're really talking about?"

"Don't try to stick something like this into one of your professional pigeonholes! The things we're feeling are just as real as anything they teach you in all those courses you took. They may not be things you and I are used to feeling, but that doesn't mean they aren't real."

"But it's true, isn't it? It may be real, but isn't that what's really happening? He said it to me himself—women like feeling there's someone who thinks they're so incredibly attractive and desirable he'll do anything for them. Isn't that the main thing he's got to offer?"

"Yes, but it's still real. And by the time you've spent any time with him, you learn what it's like to feel the kind of thing he feels."

"And that's how you feel about him? He's infected you with the same kind of . . . feelings."

"It makes everything different, Mark. That's all I can tell you. Every little thing you do with the other person—the most trivial thing—makes you feel like you're right at the center of the most important thing that's ever happened. I thought he was just a funny, pushy little man at first. He doesn't really understand women as well as he thinks he does. But that's not what's important. He's found what's important to him. He's learned what makes him happy and he's willing to do anything to have it—he'd even be willing to risk his life, I think, if that's what it took."

"You can get the same feeling he's giving you out of the right kind of drugs, too. A lot of the people who sell them even take them themselves."

"*What harm is it doing?* Will you please tell me what harm it's doing? You may not believe it, Mark—and right now I'm not sure I believe it myself—but there's times when I sit here thinking about you and I wish you could have something like this, too. I can't think of anything I'd rather see you have."

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"*With whom?*" Mark said.

The choked, strangled quality in his voice surprised both of them. Genine stared at him with her head tipped back. Then all the anger left her face. Her eyes deepened. There was a moment—in spite of all his training and experience—when Mark almost believed he was looking at something that was more than just sympathy.

"Oh, Mark," Genine said sorrowfully.

She raised her hand, as if she wanted to touch him. Then she lowered it, and Mark watched her turn her head away.

Nowadays Mark and Genine usually play Schubert when they play together. Genine has abandoned the flute and taken up the violin—a switch she made because she thought Joe Baske might be attracted by the novelties it would bring to their relationship—and they now end most of their rendezvous with Schubert's trio in B flat for cello, violin, and piano. Sometimes—if they must have something like the B flat trio right at the beginning—they start with one of Brahms' trios for the same combination of instruments. The cool, serene works produced by the composers of their own era have their attractions, too. So do some of the wild, frenzied things that became part of the repertoire in the late twentieth century. But always, in the end, there comes the moment when they slide the B flat trio out of the stack of scores on their music stands. The cello sings one of Schubert's strangely moving melodies. The violin answers it across the little space, only three or four steps wide, that separates the violinist from the cellist. The piano swells and then drifts gently into the background. In the timeless universe of art, a room in the fourth decade of the twenty-first century slips into the third decade of the nineteenth. The cool detachment of their own era becomes lost in the unknowable future. The lightfooted gallantry of the eighteenth century fades into the mists of the past. In a room in Vienna in 1827, a young man who will be dead in less than a year hears, in his mind, a music he will hear his friends play just once before he dies—the music that Mark will always think of as the music of a great longing . . . a longing that can never be fulfilled. ●

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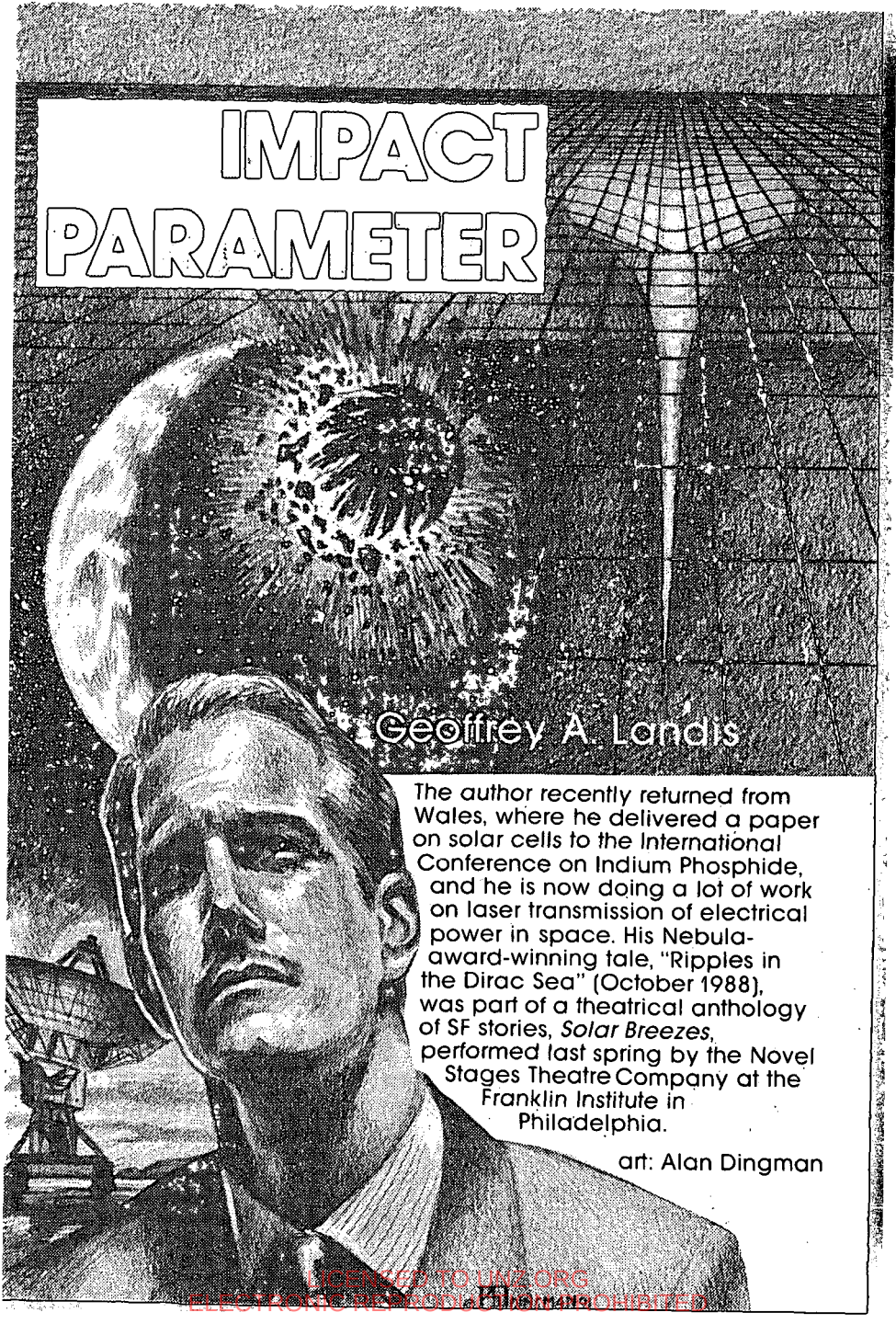

Geoffrey A. Landis

The author recently returned from Wales, where he delivered a paper on solar cells to the International Conference on Indium Phosphide, and he is now doing a lot of work on laser transmission of electrical power in space. His Nebula-award-winning tale, "Ripples in the Dirac Sea" (October 1988), was part of a theatrical anthology of SF stories, Solar Breezes, performed last spring by the Novel Stages Theatre Company at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia.

art: Alan Dingman

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The terminal whistled for his attention, a theme by Paganini in E-flat. Ben got up and stretched, trying to clear the fuzz out of his brain. He hadn't even realized he had been napping. It seemed that he was just about to say something to Barbara, something important, and now he had forgotten what it was. He shook his head and smiled as he walked over to the coffee pot. He hadn't been married to her for well over five years. It was almost four in the morning. His guaranteed-observer time, two hours on the three-meter gamma ray observatory, came when scheduling bureaucrats said it came, not when it was convenient. Smooth-talking astronomers with billions in grant money and lecture fees got the convenient times. With the low priority and ragged funding of Ben's project, he was lucky to get on the GO list at all.

Time to get moving. He started the coffee dripping and went to his computer. While the previous run was finishing, he put a request in to the satellite's command queue for it to locate and lock onto his guide stars with the finder scope. He pulled the celestial coordinates out of disk and uplinked them to the satellite, then sat back to wait.

As soon as he leaned back in the chair, Rajiv walked in. Ben looked at the clock. Four on the nose. "Right on time."

"We are working together so long, are you still thinking I would be late?"

"You, late? Never."

The console whistled again, a theme from Paderewski in a minor key. He looked at the message. The computer had found his guide stars, but one of them was not quite in the position he had specified. He downlinked a visual. There was his guide star, Omicron Ceti, with the reticule showing its starchart position in the center of the screen. The star was noticeably off the crosshairs—five microradians, maybe more. Ben pounded his fist on the console. "Damn you, why can't you work right just one time, just one lousy time?"

"What is the problem?" asked Rajiv.

"Damn star in the wrong place."

"Oh, but that is not possible, surely, no? How could a star be moving places?"

"Oh, the star's in the same old place, Raj, you can bet on it. The damn satellite is out of alignment." Most likely the satellite position sensors had drifted again.

Rajiv frowned. "We will be recalibrating? Or perhaps we just observe and let the maintenance people do their job on their own shift?"

Ben looked at the schedule. Recalibrating would take half an hour, a good quarter of his week's observing time, and it wasn't his job. The

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maintenance and calibration people had huge blocks of time, why couldn't they do their job right? Damn it, the telescope had been calibrated just three days ago. It wasn't fair. Every instinct told him to let it slide, to let somebody else do it. His project didn't require absolute positions anyway. He was searching for modulated gamma-ray laser signals from alien intelligences, and his search area was big enough that it really didn't matter if the absolute pointing was off by a tiny bit. When he found a signal, a real signal, *then* he could go back and calibrate the scope.

But in twenty-two years of searching they had never found a signal.

He'd been with the old radiotelescope SETI group at Arecibo, listening in to the stars for alien radio messages, hearing only the ocean-roar of static and the atonal singing of hydroxyl radicals. He'd been part of a fruitless search at optical wavelengths, looking for alien lasers. Infrared and UV, no luck either. Slowly the search had progressed up the spectrum. Not very many astronomers were left in the SETI camp; most of them had drifted off into other fields when success never came. Ben was one of the last. He had made a case that aliens could be sending their messages at the extremely high energy end of the spectrum, using gamma-ray lasers to send narrow-beam look-I'm-here messages. It was enough of an argument that he'd gotten GO status on the gamma ray satellite, but not enough to climb the priority queue.

But knowing there was a problem with the telescope, and not fixing it, was something he just couldn't do. It would just shuffle the problem onto the next observer, who likely needed the time just as badly as he did. He sighed. "Boot up the calibration procedure, Raj. I'll message the institute, tell them we're using a chunk of our time to do their job. Maybe they'll look fondly on us and give us some time out of the TOO register later in the week, huh?"

Rajiv brightened up. "Really, you are thinking so? That would be very considerate of them, yes indeed. Surely that is what they will be doing, you are quite right."

Right, hell. There were a hundred observers fighting for scraps of time on the satellite. But it had to be done. He might as well feel virtuous about doing it. He and Rajiv buckled down to work.

Half an hour later Omicron Ceti was still out of position. The telescope was working flawlessly. Rigel, Aldebaran, Fomalhaut; all the calibration stars were rock steady. But Omicron Ceti was still out of place.

He sighed. He'd never succeeded in recalibrating his ex-wife, either.

"It is maybe a software error?" asked Rajiv.

"Maybe," said Ben. "I can't make myself believe it, though. A software error that would just move one star? Unlikely. Next to impossible."

"Is there something peculiar about this star?"

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"Nothing I can think of. Red giant, maybe seventy, eighty parsecs away. Not the type of star we'd ordinarily look at—if it had planets, it swallowed them thousands of years ago when it went into the giant phase."

"Nobody could be moving this star?"

Ben laughed. "No. No way the star could move."

"And so what we are doing next?"

Ben sighed. "Hell, I don't know. Check it on one of the other 'scopes." He called up the listing of astronomical satellites and printed out a hardcopy of the list. "Looks like we could request target-of-opportunity time on Herschel." He shook his head. "Buddy, we sure are going to look like fools if there's something obvious we missed." He picked up the phone.

The scheduler was obliging. "Omicron Ceti? No kidding? Sure, we can get you TOO time—it's a snap. Why don't you ask Harvard Astrophysical, though? They just requested target-of-opportunity scheduling on Herschel twenty minutes ago to look at Omicron Ceti. What is it with this star, anyway? Can you tell me? Hello? Hey, are you still there?"

Ben put down the phone and crumpled up the hardcopy. "Looks like we're on to something. And we've been scooped." He sighed. "Might as well go ahead with what's left of the usual session, Raj. Maybe we can salvage something out of the morning."

The Harvard astronomer was Janilee Stormer, an old gamma-ray astronomer from the pre-satellite days when they still put telescopes on the peaks of mountains. He knew her slightly from seminars. He arranged to meet her for lunch in Harvard Square. He spent the rest of the morning calling up archived photos of the region, trusting her to make the proper measurements during her observing run.

She'd already ordered when he arrived. She handed him a stack of hardcopy without a word, and started her lunch as he leafed through her data. At last he dropped the data on the table and looked up at her. "Any idea what it is?"

"None at all," she said. "You saw the spectra we took. Normal."

"We got some old pictures out of the archives for comparison."

"Good. I put in a request for that, but I've been too busy to get to them. Find anything?"

"Yeah. It's right at the limit of resolution, but by my best guess, this has been going on for five years, maybe a bit more. Right about five years ago the star started drifting slowly out of position."

"Hmmmm. Funny." She sipped her hot chocolate. "Have you checked the background stars yet?"

"No, I haven't. Why? Have you?"

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"Just an idea. Tell me what you find, will you? Get together again about eight?"

"Right-o."

"Good." She gathered up her data and left. He hadn't even ordered yet. He decided that he wasn't interested in lunch anyway, and went back to his lab.

He compared the most recent starphoto with an old photo from the archives. When he overlaid the two, it was quite obvious that all the stars in the region were affected, even background stars thousands of parsecs away. In a tiny region of space, only a few seconds of arc across, some cosmic hand had nudged all the stars away from one spot in the sky. More peculiar, one faint star had disappeared entirely. It would have been exactly in the center of the avoided zone.

He had Rajiv print out an extra hardcopy of the overlays, and brought the photos with him when he met again with Stormer. She brought out her own data, a computer plot where the distance of displacement had been plotted against the distance from the extrapolated center of the anomaly. Clearly, the closer the stars were to the center, the more they had been moved to the side.

"What about the missing star? What happened to it?"

She smiled. "Take a look at this one. I had the Herschel integrate the photon count over a ten minute interval, editing out the foreground stars." She showed him a photograph. The background was a chaos of irregular brightness. He could almost see the pattern, stars toward the center smeared away in a thumb-sized circle. "And the missing one?"

She reached over with a fork and traced out an arc. "Here."

Once it had been pointed out, he could see it clearly. A narrow ring surrounded the blank spot, so faint as to be almost indistinguishable from the noise of the photo. He traced the circle all the way around. "My god. An Einstein ring."

"Bingo. We've found ourselves a big ol' gravitational lens."

"It must be incredibly massive."

"Or incredibly close. But what's causing it? Brown dwarf? A neutron star?"

"My god, Jan, that's not the real question." He spread out his photos, ordering them from oldest to most recent. Over the last five years, the anomaly had been growing stronger, but the center stayed firmly in the same region of Cetus. "No proper motion. Whatever it is, *it's coming right at us.*"

"Have you told anybody yet?"

Ben shook his head. "My graduate assistant Rajiv knows."

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"Same here. Let's keep this quiet a bit longer, okay? Until we know a bit more?"

"We'll need to bring an astrophysicist in on it."

"I have one in mind. A relativist, too. What I meant, let's not spread it around too much outside just yet. Maybe there's something we're missing."

Ben shook his head. "I hope so. I really hope so."

Ben reserved a small conference room in the physics center for the discussion. One by one the various participants arrived. When the last had entered, Dr. Stormer closed the door, walked to the front of the table, and started the discussion without any preamble. "We have now searched for an object in the center of the gravity lens in every wavelength range available," she said. "If it were a brown dwarf, we'd see it in the IR or microwave. A neutron star would shout out across the spectrum. Nothing. I think we can confidently eliminate everything except a black hole."

"Everything we know of, that is," said Ben.

"It's invisible, it's massive, it bends light—what else could it be?"

"I don't know. Just covering the bases."

"But a black hole would be having an accretion disk," Rajiv said. "Such a thing would be jumping with gammas, no? Are we seeing nothing in the gamma ray spectrum?"

"No." Dr. Stormer sketched a circle in the air with her forefinger. "Nothing there but cosmic background."

"Doesn't mean anything," said the astrophysicist, Tim Deloria. He was a tall, darkhaired postdoc wearing a gold earring and a leather vest. "If it's a mature hole, and hasn't passed through a dense gas cloud in the recent past, it might not have anything to accrete."

Isu Yokomono, the relativist, cleared his throat and spoke. "I have plotted the gravitational lensing effect against theory." He tapped his keypad to flash a slide onto the screen. "As you can see, the agreement is excellent, except at very low impact parameter. Tim suggests this may be a refraction effect from compression of the interstellar medium near the hole. He's working on a model. I can't give you a good value for the mass until you can give me a distance, but the best guess would be between point one and point oh one solar masses, which I am told is unusually low by astrophysics standards."

"Ben?"

"Right. It's hard to measure distance of something we can see only by looking at where it *isn't*, but we've managed to make tentative parallax measurements from the archive data. About a thousand astronomical units."

Somebody whistled. "That close? Are you sure?"

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Ben shook his head. "I'm sorry, folks. It doesn't matter just exactly how far it is. What matters is how fast it's coming."

"And that is?"

He put his graph on the screen. The line showing the projected trajectory neatly cut across the Earth's orbit. "Give or take a small margin of error, in ten days the black hole intersects the Earth."

"How much is the margin of error?"

Ben shook his head slowly. "Not enough, gentlemen. Not enough by half."

When evening fell Ben went out into the apartment's tiny backyard. The lawn was unkempt and the grass choked with weeds. No point in fixing it up now. He set up his little telescope next to an abandoned washing machine and with little difficulty found Cetus low in the east. Cetus was more familiar to him than the yard was; for decades they had searched the star Tau Ceti at every frequency for every modulation scheme they could think of. Omicron Ceti was lost in the haze of the horizon and the skyglow from the city. It didn't matter; there was nothing there to see with his little telescope anyway.

Day by day the anomalous region grew larger. The amount of distortion in the starfield was minute, far too small to be visible with the naked eye, but knowing exactly what to look for, the effect was enormous and ominous.

They met four days later to discuss their most recent results.

"Can you tell us just what, exactly, is going to happen?" Ben asked. "Tides? Earthquakes? What?"

Tim looked at Isu. "It's coming a little too fast for us to see much in the way of prelude effects, I think. The exact details will depend on the impact parameter. For all of the scenarios, we'll get the atmosphere ripped off first, of course."

"And the oceans," said Isu.

"The planet then gets stretched out like a sausage."

"Like pulling on silly putty," said Isu. He smiled. "At this point viscous mantle material oozes out through the cracks in the crust, like stepping on a tube of toothpaste."

"More likely the frictional effect just melts the crust," said Tim. "After this, at low impact parameter, the planet breaks up. Somewhere between 50 and 90 percent of the material forms a ring around the hole and gets slowly swallowed, while a small portion gets sprayed out into space in the form of droplets of magma. Presumably these then cool into asteroidal material, unless they're flung entirely free of the sun. At higher impact parameter the planet simply gets stretched out into a sausage and breaks up into droplets. This effect is rather interesting, actually—"

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"I think I get the picture. Any chance of surviving?"

Tim shook his head. "Even at the three sigma point, the atmosphere gets ripped off."

"Oh."

The room was quiet for a moment.

"It's too damn unlikely, you know?" said Tim. "To be coming right at us, right exactly precisely at us—give me a break, will you? That's not coincidence, that's conspiracy. Here's what I think. I think that we've been polluting the galaxy with radio waves, old 'Happy Days' reruns, 'My Favorite Martian,' 'Days of Our Lives,' that crap, and I think that somebody out there just got pissed. In the radio spectrum the Earth is brighter than most stars, you know that? We put out megawatts, gigawatts of garbage. I think somebody got so tired of old 'Gunsmoke' reruns that they just lobbed a black hole our direction, no offense buddy but just shut up permanently, okay?"

"You don't really believe that, do you?" said Ben. "Any civilization that had the ability to push around black holes . . ."

"I know, I know. You'd think they'd talk to us first, and you've been looking, and they're not talking. Hell, maybe they're just the silent type. Maybe they're critics. I don't know."

Isu cleared his throat. "In any case, I think we have quite enough data to publish," he said. "Should we prepare a press release first? I think on this one we may get some attention."

Jan looked at him with contempt. "It's a bit pointless to do that, don't you think?"

Isu shrugged. "I don't see why not."

"I can," said Tim. "Why get everybody upset over something they can't do anything about? I'd say we should very definitely *not* tell anybody. Keep it close, or there'll be panic in the streets. Chaos."

"Heck, that's not half of it," said Jan. "Do you really want to spend your last days giving interviews to reporters? Think carefully. You know what it's like being followed around by cameras? Explaining the same basic principles of physics over and over to people who wouldn't understand them if you pounded it into their skulls with an air-hammer? Living without any privacy at all, with reporters camping in your living room, following you everywhere, into bed, into the bathroom?"

"Yeah," said Tim. He made a face. "Interviews on television shows with psychics who say that they predicted this ten years ago and it will go away if we all think rosy thoughts and chant Om."

"And holy-rollers who say that it was all revealed in the Bible, but don't worry because the faithful—of their particular faith, that is—will be saved," said Jan. "Dimwits who tell you that it's all the scientists'

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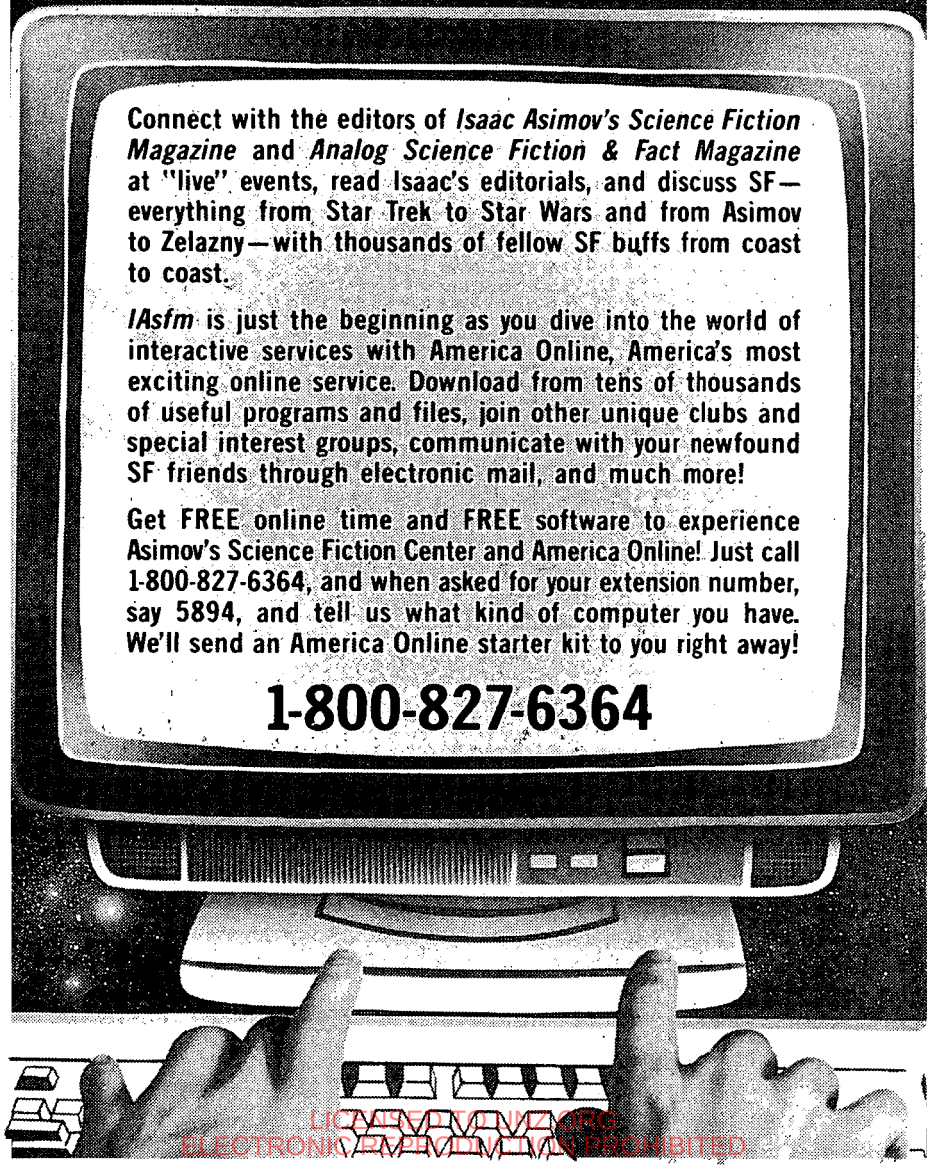

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Okay, okay, maybe you're right. It's too bad, though—the first thing I've ever been on that's really hot. It just seems we ought to tell *somebody*."

Jan shrugged. "Anybody else think we should go public? Take a vote on it?" She looked around. Nobody spoke up. "I think it's settled, then."

"But this thing, it is going to kill us," said Rajiv. "Is there nothing that we can be doing?"

The room was silent. Finally Ben answered him. "Afraid not, Raj. It's just too big. There's no handle, no way to get a grip on it. We're like an ant about to get stepped on by an elephant—maybe we can see what's coming, but that's not going to stop us from getting squished."

"It's the cosmic lottery," added Tim. He shook his head. "And we just went bankrupt."

2. *Just Before the End*

And then there were only a few days left. The project team had stopped meeting regularly. There was nothing left to do. "It's the end of the world, Ben," the astronomer Jan said. "What are you going to do?"

"Party?" he answered. "I don't know. How about you?"

"Abandon my diet, that's for sure." She laughed. "Clean my desk. I'd like to face my maker with a clean desk."

"Think you'll find anything interesting?"

"I don't know. That's what's so exciting. On the other hand, I've been thinking that maybe I'll just clean it right out the window. What the heck. And after *that*, I think there are a few people over in administration I'm going to tell exactly what I think of. Something they've been needing for a long time." She smiled. "I thought about taking my pistol—I shoot every weekend, did I tell you? Third in the state championships—I was thinking about some live target practice using administrators for targets. But I figure, why bother? They'll be dead in a week, too."

Ben laughed. There was a bit of life in the old astronomer after all. "You going to tell anybody? Your family?"

"God, no! It would only get them upset—why make their lives miserable now? Hell, if I tell anybody, I'll tell somebody I detest."

"Makes sense. How about you, Raj? What are you going to do?"

"I am going home to India. I will see all my friends again, my cousins and grandparents and my two little nieces. I will bring many many gifts for them. Oh, they will be so happy to see me! Yes."

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"Yeah?" Ben raised an eyebrow. "Where'd you get the cash to buy a ticket?"

Rajiv smiled. "I am borrowing money on my credit card. Low interest, two years to pay."

"Why not? Guess you can do anything you want. Rob a bank. Why not just steal a Learjet—what are they going to do, kill you?"

"Oh, no—I would never rob a bank. That would be dishonest. How could you think that of me?"

Ben patted him on the arm. "I know, Raj. Have a good trip home."

As he was leaving, Ben ran into Tim and Isu. Tim was holding a bottle of wine, Isu a pile of books and papers. "I'm just in to pick up some of my stuff," said Isu. "Guess I won't be around for the rest of the week—for the rest of my life, for that matter."

Ben shrugged.

"I wrote a haiku. You want to hear it?"

"Sure."

Tim handed Isu the bottle of wine.

"Thanks, pal." He took a sip, handed the bottle back to Tim, and cleared his throat. "Singularity:

'This is it.
Nothing else you ever did matters
The place where all your words mean nothing
Doorway to forever.' "

Isu paused and looked at Ben. "You like it?"

Ben shrugged. He never could find much to say about poetry. "Aren't haiku supposed to have only three lines?"

"So I'm not a purist. You don't like it, sue me."

"Hey, no problem. So—you have plans yet how to spend the last week?"

"Sure. Yesterday I went to church. The Baptist church on Boylston, and the Epis—Episcip—Episco*palian* church downtown. Tomorrow I'm visiting the Baha'i temple and the Quaker meeting. Sunday I'll get baptized."

"Covering all the bases, huh?"

"Oh, no, there are many more. I have much studying to do." He smiled ruefully. "The final exam is coming, and I've been skipping my homework."

"Yeah. Well, I guess it's your last final, anyway. Hope you do well on it." They shook hands.

"How about you, Tim? You going with Isu?"

"Heck, no. I've already *got* religion." He winked. "Her name is Candy—can you believe that? Candy? No baloney." He shook his head, and took a sip of wine. "For the rest of the week, you can bet your ass I intend to worship at her shrine as often as possible and in as many

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different positions as I can think of. When the end of the world comes, we're not even going to *notice* it."

"Uh, I'd think that there was only so much of that you'd be able to do."

"Yeah, maybe—so I'm going on an all-oyster diet. How about you, Ben? You got some body-heat you can turn to for a little comfort for the dying?"

"Uh, guess not. No."

Tim clapped him on the shoulder. "Hey, no crime, buddy. Some guys got it, some don't. Tell you what you do. Find yourself a high-priced downtown call-girl, one that takes plastic, and rent her for a *week*. You know what I'm saying? I tell you, you will forget all about the end of the world, guaranteed."

"It's a thought."

"Righto. Gotta go, got something to put in the oven, so to speak."

"See ya."

"I doubt it. Have a good life." He left.

Ben walked out the door, and realized that there was nothing he wanted to do, no place he wanted to go.

He could go home, he supposed. Tell his family he loved them, tell them goodbye. They'd be surprised to see him, but glad, of course, in their low-key fashion. But what would he tell them? Was there any real point in telling them the world was ending in a week? It could only upset them.

Religion wasn't for him, either. Try Tim's solution? One of the graduate students, maybe? That kind of thing was rather frowned on by the admin, but what could they do, fire him? But the students had lives of their own that he was mostly ignorant of. He wouldn't even know where to start.

On an impulse he called up his ex-wife Barbara.

"Ben? I don't believe it. Are you drunk or something? High?"

"Is there some law I can't call you? I just thought I'd like to see you again. Is that a crime?"

She was silent for a long time. "It's been a long time, Ben. I don't know. Are you sure you want to stir up those old ghosts again?"

"I remember some good times. Don't you remember the time we went walking down the old boardwalk on Revere Beach—"

She laughed. "Gosh, I haven't thought about that in years. And the abandoned roller-coaster. You think it's still there?"

"I think it got washed away a long time ago, when the water started to rise."

"Yeah. A lot of things got washed away. Too many things."

"So, how about it? For old times?"

"I just don't know. I don't think it's such a good idea, Ben. I mean, but, well . . ."

"Uh, I guess I should have asked—are you, ah, seeing somebody?"

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Hyland came into Mallorys Bar and Sleep

with Angus Thermopyle... *She was gorgeous.*

In contrast, he was probably the most disreputable man who still had docking rights at the station. *No one was surprised by the current which sparked across the crowd when she and Nick Succorso* *first spotted each other.*

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THE REAL STORY
and
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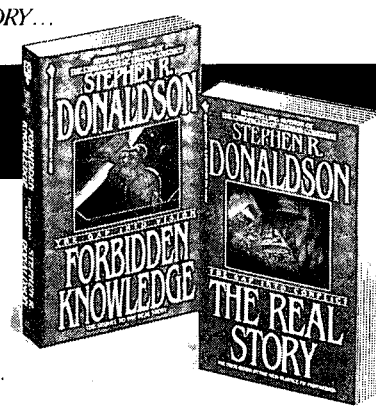

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"Well . . . yes. Sure, lots of people. Not the way you mean it, though. I've got my circle of friends. It's enough."

"So, why not? Just this one time, I promise. Please?"

"Well . . . okay. You know where I live now?"

He stopped on the way for a bouquet of flowers. He picked out two dozen lilies, all colors, charging them on his card.

She was a little older, a little more weathered than his memory. Her hair was long now, a thick braid tossed casually over her left shoulder, but still as deep a shade of black as ever. He handed her the flowers. "You're looking good."

She hesitated, but finally took them from him. She thrust her face into the bunch and inhaled deeply. "I always liked lilies."

"I remember."

"Here." She handed the flowers back to him and went into the kitchen for a vase. He looked at the posters. They were different from the movie posters she had when he married her, but the same types of old movies. *Casablanca. Gone with the Wind. Jewel of the Nile.* She came back with an enameled brass vase, one he'd brought back for her once long ago when he'd gone to India for a conference.

"You still have that? You said you threw out all my stuff."

She shrugged. "I lied. I always liked that one."

"I know something else you always liked." He took her in his arms. As he leaned over to kiss her, she turned her face aside.

"Oh, Ben . . . I'm not sure this is a good idea. We don't have that type of a relationship any more. Ben . . ."

He brought his hand up and traced the line of her jaw with a fingertip, lingering at the hollow of her throat. "Just this one last time."

"Well . . . okay." She tipped her head back, and he kissed the tip of her nose. She giggled. "I guess sometimes maybe I do miss you. A little bit."

The morning sunlight was faded and tinted vaguely pink. The cat sleeping on the windowsill stretched, blinked, turned around to center herself more fully in the faded sunbeam, and went back to sleep. Barbara looked at him. "That was nice. You can be so nice sometimes, I almost miss being married to you."

He didn't say anything, just continued stroking her breast slowly, almost absently, with his hand.

"But you were always self-centered. Sometimes you would just ignore me, treat me like an object."

"I guess I was busy."

"Oh, yes, busy watching for your aliens. Busy? You were obsessed. Imagine, fifteen years ago I thought that a man with an obsession was sexy. All that intensity. Damn, I was naïve." She rolled out of bed,

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searched around on the floor for her panties, pulled them on and then looked around for her bra.

"In the living room, remember?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Barb? Would you stay with me?"

She walked back into the bedroom and looked him in the eye. "No."

"Please? Just for a while?"

"You always were a little hard of listening, Ben. No. I remember too much of what it was like. I'm finally doing what I want, and I like it fine. No. Period. Final."

"Please?"

"Five years, Ben. So why all of a sudden?"

"Because the end of the world is coming, and I don't want to be alone." His voice sounded childish, even to himself. He hadn't meant to say it. It had just sort of slipped out.

She laughed. "I can't believe it. You, getting religion? You always were one to go diving off the deep end. Remember what the marriage counselor told you, way back? That you ought to try talking with a therapist, it would do you good? Maybe she was right. You might think about it." She shook her head. "I told you, Ben. The night was fun, it really was. You can be sweet sometimes. Don't spoil it, okay? If I stayed with you, we'd only get back into the same old rut. I couldn't take it again. So let's just say goodbye, okay?"

He sighed. "Okay." He paused. "Then one last breakfast at the Crêpe Stop?"

"No more talking foolish? No pressure on me?"

"Not if you don't want to."

"Okay. But after that, I'm going."

The day had not yet built up to the furnace heat of a Cambridge summer, and they found an empty table out on the boardwalk. It was built up almost a foot above the old street level. He looked out across the water. "The blue of the sky," he said, suddenly.

"Huh? What about it?"

"How blue, so poignantly blue it is. Nothing else is quite that color, so vibrant, so full of life."

She shrugged. "I suppose it is. Not any more than any other day."

"I never notice. Every day I walk to work, the miracle of sky is luminous above me, and I never even look up. So many things. Look." He gestured at the buildings across the way. They were dilapidated brick apartment buildings, the upper stories faced with wood. "Look at them, really *look*. Look at the color and texture of the brick. The brickwork. Look at the carvings on the lintels, on the cornices. Just old buildings?

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Look at the work some ancient stonemason did, long ago. You can see the love and care he put into the job."

"Irish," she said. "The old stonemasons were Irish and Italian. My mother told me that once. I guess you don't see workmanship like that any more. Today it's all aluminum and plexi boxes."

"And we walk by it every day. That building, that tired building with peeling paint and clotheslines on the roof flying somebody's flowered sheets, that's what it is to be human. It's beautiful, beautiful. And listen." He was silent for a moment. Behind the traffic noises, the babble of conversations around them, the lapping of wavelets against the boardwalk, was a soft trilling chireep, chireep, chireep. Tiny frogs. Spring peepers? He'd heard them every spring, but never bothered to look up what they were. Since the waters had started to rise, they were peeping all through midsummer. "The sounds of life, just singing its joy at being alive."

"My, aren't you poetic today." She was silent for a moment. "You really believe it," she said softly. "You really *do* believe that the world is coming to an end."

He nodded. He couldn't trust himself to say anything. His eyes were full of tears.

"What will you do when it doesn't? When the end of the world comes, and the world doesn't notice, just keeps on going?"

"I wish I could believe that, Barbara. But it's coming. There's nothing we can do to stop it."

"But what if, just suppose, it didn't? You won't do anything foolish, will you? You'll see a professional then, won't you? Please? Promise me?"

He smiled. "Barbara, if the end of the world doesn't come, I'll laugh out loud. I'll hug everybody I know. I'll parade naked down the middle of the street in front of the State House playing a trombone, at noon. And I'll never, not for one day, forget to be glad I'm alive."

She shook her head, vagrant wisps of hair blowing across her face. "Sometimes I really like you, Ben, in spite of all the bad times. I really do. Take care of yourself, will you?" She blew him a kiss and walked away. A block down the boardwalk, almost lost in the morning pedestrian traffic, she hesitated and looked back. He waved, and she turned and disappeared into the crowd.

"Goodbye," he said. She'd left her crêpe untouched.

He'd spent so long at the telescope listening for voices. They weren't there. Or if they were, they weren't talking. Maybe everybody was *listening*, nobody broadcasting.

He'd had an uncle who had spent his life looking for little green men; under the bed, behind the curtains, in the bottom of a whisky bottle.

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He'd said they were beaming messages into his brain, that he heard them every day. "Eccentric," the family had called him on good days. "Crazy," on the worse days. He'd finally allowed himself to be put away. But at least he had *heard* the voices he'd spent his life searching for.

The facility at Arecibo had been mostly shut down by the time he'd left. There was little it could do that couldn't be done better by one of the radio interferometers in space. But he still had the access codes from his time there, and he doubted that they would have changed them.

They hadn't.

He had trouble deciding what to broadcast. At first he thought the Encyclopedia Britannica would be best, but at the last minute, after accessing the Arecibo computer and programming his request, he changed his mind. Somehow something as dry as the encyclopedia didn't fit his mood. He chose Mahler, the crazy, romantic old Austrian, to tell the universe that once there had been a planet with life and intelligence, and occasionally a little bit of wisdom. As the Earth slowly turned, it would be broadcast out across the entire sky. Maybe sometimes we did make a mess of things, he thought, but we could love life, too. The universe may crush us, but we had *style*, damn it. We were here. Where were you? Where the hell were *you?*

One day left. He tried calling Barbara again, but there was no answer. Perhaps she'd unplugged the phone. He called his parents, and his sister, but found he didn't have anything to say. He had never been very good at long phone calls. He settled for just telling them that he loved them.

"Why, thank you, Benjy," his mother said. "That's very nice. And we love you, too."

He walked the streets of the city, not going anyplace in particular, just taking in the sights and sounds of life. It really *was* beautiful, he thought. Even the discarded papers swirling in the wind were beautiful.

Mists rose from the canals as night fell over the city. He was in a part of town he wouldn't ordinarily think of walking in at night. Neon flashed from the bars at every street corner. Fragments of music and rapid women's conversation in some foreign language spilled out of open doorways. Three Cambodian men in T-shirts sat on a doorstep drinking wine and talking. They stopped talking to watch him pass, and one of them called out. "Hey, brother, how's it going?"

"Fine," he said. "Everything's fine. How about you?"

"Doing okay, yes, think I'm doing okay, thank you."

He walked on.

He thought for a moment that perhaps he should be at the observatory, taking notes on the approach of the black hole right up to the end. Like a good scientist. Hell with that.

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He'd never been much of a drinking man, even in grad school, when the Friday night parties were about the only entertainment around. But it seemed he had to do something to celebrate, no, to *memorialize* the last night of the world. He stopped in at a liquor store. He wasn't sure what to get. Champagne, certainly. He wasn't sure if he could tell one from another, but he picked the most expensive. It was a week's salary. Some hundred year old brandy. Bailey's Irish Cream—that had always been Barbara's favorite. Why not? He grabbed a dozen other liquors, picking them for the oddly shaped bottles and interesting names. He'd never get another chance to try them. He brought the collection to the front.

"End of the World Coming, Says Harvard Astronomer," proclaimed the tabloids at the checkout counter. "Black Hole Will Swallow Earth." He laughed, quietly at first and then with an almost hysterical energy. So Isu had spilled the news after all—and nobody cared.

The cashier looked at him, and at the assortment of liquor, with a dubious stare. "A going-away party," he said. "So to speak."

She shook her head. "Odd selection. Some party—you started early, eh? Well, hope y'all have fun, y'hear?"

"I hope so, too. Say, you do take credit cards, I assume?"

3. *The Day the World Ended*

He woke up groggy and nauseated. Painfully bright sunlight was streaming in the window, and the doorbell was ringing insistently. It took him a moment to realize that the ringing was real, and not part of the painful confusion in his cranium.

He hadn't expected to wake up at all. After a moment he recognized the voice of his neighbor from upstairs, an old Mexican immigrant who sometimes came over on Sundays to share the newspaper.

"Hello? Hello?"

"What is it?" he shouted back. His voice was more of a croak. He found his pants and pulled them on.

"Aren't you awake? God, you missed it! It was incredible!"

"The black hole?" he said, confused. It just passed by? How could it? "Missed what?"

"Haven't you even seen the news? Join the real world, Ben! They're here! Aliens! From outer space!" He went over to the window and flung back the curtains. "Look!"

In the distance, something floated over Boston harbor. Ben squinted. A giant balloon? It was hard for him to focus. Then he caught the scale of it. It was floating behind the towers of the financial district, and,

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whatever it was, it was *huge*. It was no balloon the world had ever seen. He suddenly realized the *alienness* of it. It was nothing at all the world had ever seen. He felt an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. All his life he had spent searching for aliens, and here they were. He turned away from the world, childishly afraid to show his tears. They were here. Nothing would ever be the same again.

"But . . . the hole," he said, stumbling over the words. "What about the black hole?"

"Hole? Oh, you must mean the loophole? That's right, I remember. The TV man explained something about the loophole. They brought it with them. It's a, uh, a 'loophole in the theory of relativity,' right. What allows them to travel. I forgot the details. They said it would be parked somewhere out by Saturn or something, we could use it if we want to."

He remembered now. Wormholes, he'd heard them called. A wormhole was precisely the same as a black hole from the outside, but deep inside, at the throat, a wormhole connected to another wormhole somewhere else, instead of to an infinitely dense singularity. Back in the 'eighties a couple of physicists had claimed that a sufficiently advanced civilization might be able to make a wormhole and keep it open, use it to travel across interstellar distances. It had caused a stir at the time, but was eventually forgotten.

It made sense. It all made sense. While he had wasted his life listening to the sky, desperately listening for a distant voice, all that time they had been coming. Why beam radio waves when you can just bring a loophole and get there in an instant?

On an impulse, he hugged his neighbor. The old man was surprised, but after a moment he hugged Ben back. "It's wonderful," Ben said. "It's the end of the world, it really is."

"Ah, the world ends every day," the old man said. "The secret of it is, it is made anew every morning."

"That's deep."

The old man nodded. "Something my father used to say, long ago."

Ben realized that the job he'd been doing all his life had become obsolete overnight. He could do whatever he wanted. Sail around the world. Climb Mount Everest. But first he had a promise to keep.

Tomorrow morning, he would be down on the steps of the state house at noon, celebrating the way the world had been born again.

"Say, you wouldn't happen to have a *trombone,* would you?"

The old man gave him a puzzled look. Ben started laughing, laughing like the world was new.

And it was. ●

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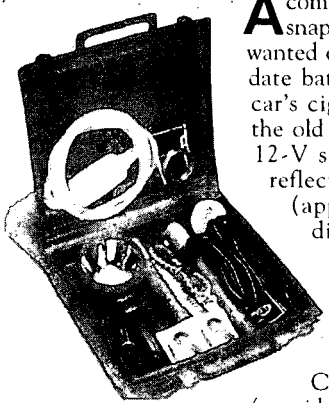

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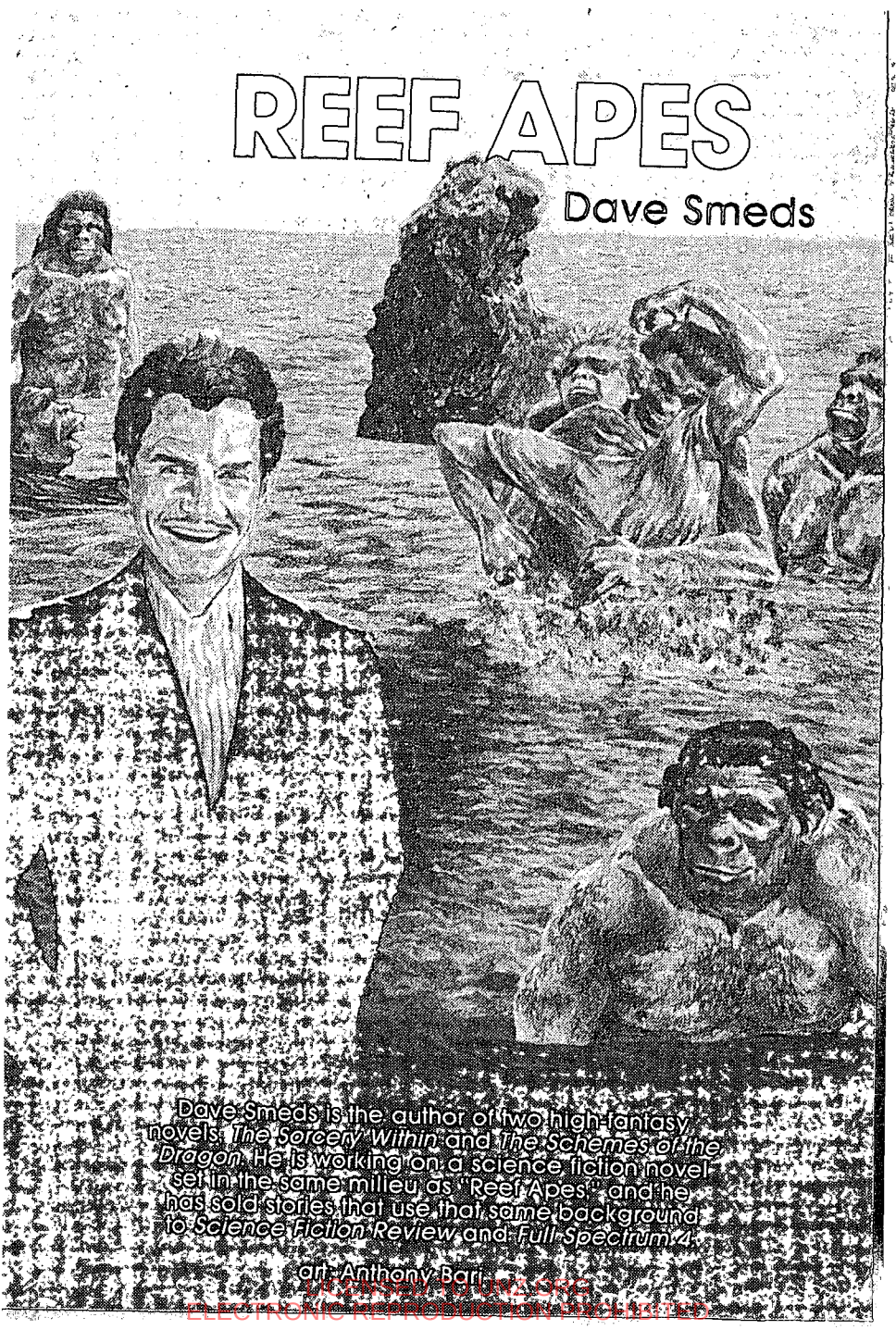
REEF APES

Dave Smeds



Dave Smeds is the author of two high-fantasy novels, *The Sorcery Within* and *The Schemes of the Dragon*. He is working on a science fiction novel set in the same milieu as "Reef Apes," and he has sold stories that use that same background to *Science Fiction Review* and *Full Spectrum 4*.

art: Anthony Bari

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The audience loved it when the reef ape killed the researcher.

Louis Sheldon listened to the commotion and smiled. He backed up the replay to let those who had been caught unaware get a better look.

Click. The primate troop gambolled in the shoals, cleaving to amorphous family units, with young adult males roaming farther afield. Barely four feet tall, the females resembled Ituru pygmies, except for the long, Rapunzel-style tresses that their babies clung to as they floated in the surf. The largest males fell shy of five feet in height, but corded muscle draped their brown bodies from neck to ankle.

The researcher, a lean, wiry man with Nordic features, towered over the apemen, but nevertheless gave them plenty of room. He waded along the fringes of the troop, taking care not to truly mingle. The creatures ignored his familiar presence.

With one exception. The alpha male, perched on a spur of reef just above tide level, monitored the man with a baleful, irrational glare. The researcher failed to notice the surveillance, nor did he see that the creature was picking obsessively at a raw, pus-swollen foot.

The human passed a bit too near a particular reef ape female. With a covetous shriek, the alpha male launched from his rock. He careened through the waist-deep water toward the researcher, who barely had time to turn before he was seized by the neck. Vertebrae cracked. The researcher's eyes glazed.

Screeching, the reef ape held the human below the waves until the spasmodic jerking ceased.

"Reef apes rarely kill," Sheldon told the observers. "They aren't even especially aggressive. But obviously, they've lost little of the strength their progenitors needed to swing in the trees."

The alpha male returned to his rock, snorting, and shook his wet hair off of his shoulders. Nanodocs repaired the researcher's broken neck, flushed the salt water from his lungs, and kick-started him back to life. He rose, sputtering. The alpha male glared again. The man, frowning, strode away from the troop and continued his observations from a safer distance.

The fire in the reef ape's eyes died out. He regarded the remote figure with a distinctly apologetic expression.

Several members of the audience meandered between killer and victim like ghosts walking on the water. In fact, it was they who were part of reality. The primates, the shoals, and the East African sunshine were simulations of a scene that had transpired nearly a year earlier. Louis reduced the action to slow motion to allow everyone to step up close and examine the reef apes in detail.

"Note the bipedal gait, the humanlike noses, the lack of body hair, the pendulous breasts. We've only evolved our Proconsul stock one point five

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million years into the aquatic phase, and already they've clearly entered the genus *Homo*. Say hello to your great-great-great grandparents."

On the far side of the simulation dome, a woman leaned down to assure herself that a reef ape baby, floating face down apart from its mother, was truly enjoying its independence and not drowning. The infant raised its head, took a breath, and dunked down again. The woman grinned with the joy only baby antics can inspire.

Louis, without interrupting his narration, gazed at the woman intently, memorizing her features. He marked the moment that she left the dome. Ultimately his glib, polished lecture wound down. Smiling at the applause, he bequeathed the question-and-answer session to an assistant and escaped the simulation theater.

Seventy yards from the dome, waves lapped gently against the coast of the peninsula. Shaking the hands that reached out to congratulate him, Louis wandered down the beach toward the main hotel. The seas were calm,the humid weather made tolerable by the smooth breeze pouring off the gulf waters. The sand glistened, white and pure, a playground reserved exclusively for conference attendees. Louis had to concede that the site selection committee had chosen an outstanding venue for the annual get-together.

Louis stopped near the docks, in the shade of the banner reading WELCOME—COUNCIL OF MARINE BIOLOGISTS. The beach bustled with his colleagues and their associates, many of whom waved him toward their dense, research-citing conversations. Louis shook his head politely. He'd had enough shop talk. He was searching for a more exciting pastime.

He drank in the sea air, leavened with the scent of sun-warmed humanity. How differently this compared to last year, when he had transmitted his virtual self to the conference, leaving behind his senses of taste and smell, touch and temperature. Not this time. This was Baja California. The waters of the gulf provided one of the most vibrant marine ecologies on the planet. It wouldn't be the same if he couldn't get his feet down in the silt, taunt the manta rays first-hand, lick the brine. One hundred ten years back, he'd done his first fieldwork here; the place meant something to him.

And now it was the crucible of his success.

Half the individuals on the beach were taking advantage of the locale to strut their choice of seaside attire. Louis saw examples of styles from as early as A.D. 1900 through every century since, some exquisitely color-coordinated to the wearer's complexion, others so garish as to set teeth on edge. The two standouts, both modern, were a chameleon bodysuit that, when viewed against the right background, made the man inside it nearly invisible below the neck; and a woman's one-piece that

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made her torso appear to be an aquarium stocked with the various tropical fish species that she studied.

Everyone else went naked. Among them, Louis found the woman he had marked.

She was a tall, sleek redhead with a wide, sensuous mouth and emerald eyes. Though several equally stunning women stood within a few paces of her, Louis scarcely noticed them. His stare caught the prominent contours of her clavicle, paused on her widely set breasts, and followed the supple indentation of her midriff downward. He didn't recognize her, though from the ease with which she ingratiated herself into conversations and the careful attention paid to her comments, she had to be someone well-established in the marinebio community.

"Interrogative," he said, locking his gaze on her face. "Who's that woman?"

"Rizal, Veronica," replied the disembodied voice of the Net. "Specialist in plankton synthesis, related areas. Adept status." Veronica Rizal. Wearing a new body, wasn't that interesting? Unlike those people who adopted a new morph with each change of mood, Veronica had always favored the same look—beautiful, of course, as was the rule in these days of molecule-by-molecule cosmetology, but consistent. She was the kind of woman who, in an earlier age, would have eschewed make-up, perfume, and the latest clothing fashions, and simply let hygiene, heredity, and a wholesome lifestyle frame her attractiveness.

She was playing a different game now. No wonder she was bare. Why wear a swimsuit? Her body *was* a swimsuit. Putting anything over it would be redundant.

Louis nodded his head slowly in approval. He was likewise naked. Though he seldom changed his morph, he had over many years refined it to the exact design he liked. Why hide the handiwork?

Veronica extracted herself from a conversation and waded out into the surf. She dipped into a mild swell and came up wet. Louis, mesmerized, watched the rivulets drain off her chin, her elbows, the undersides of her breasts. She'd programmed her sunscreens to give her skin an ideal medium tan; the water droplets beaded upon it and sparkled like jewels on a fairy tale princess.

The woman tucked her chin down, shrouding her face within a wreath of deep red hair. Lips drawn tight, she stared at the wave retreating down her calves and ankles, but Louis could tell her mind was not focused on her feet. Confirming his guess, she raised her glance and held it on a knot of people standing down the beach, toward the turtle sanctuary. She sighed, bowed her head again, and drifted off to the edge of another group.

Louis searched the party that Veronica had glanced at. As he expected,

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he discovered within it the sandy-haired figure of Bernd Hauser, a maestro in null gravity marine environments. Louis knew him, of course. Louis made it a point to meet all the maestros and adepts of his field. For the last five of these conferences, Bernd and Veronica had been arm-in-arm, sharing smiles and hotel accommodations. That was before Bernd went off on sabbatical to Ganymede, and came back married.

With one last glance at the lonely redhead, Louis approached and filtered into Bernd's group. At first he avoided the maestro, engaging in small talk with others, but when Bernd drifted out of the conversational spiral, Louis appeared like a Cheshire Cat beside him.

"How's it going, Bernd?"

"Hmmm? Oh, Louis. Hello. Say, your *Homo maritimus* research is the talk of the weekend. You'll make adept for sure now."

"I hope so," Louis said modestly. He was anything but humble inside. He'd carefully orchestrated his nomination, making sure his name was listed first on the right papers, developing friendships with just the right colleagues—he'd even done a significant fraction of the actual research. He treasured every last confirmation of his achievement.

They chatted, Louis lulling Bernd with sincere, often complimentary references to the man's work, tempered with random gossip. Bernd listened raptly—few people could be as spellbinding as Louis—but from time to time, the maestro's eyes drifted down the beach. Louis concealed his interest.

Finally the moment came. "That new morph of Veronica's is exceptional, don't you think?"

"Everything about Veronica is exceptional," Bernd replied wistfully.

"I couldn't help but notice that she's over there, and you're over here."

Bernd dug his toes into the sand. "Yes. I wish it didn't have to be that way. My wife's not with me at the conference, but if it got back to her that I. . . "

"It's not over, then?" Louis said softly.

"Oh, it's over. But not because it was meant to be. Time and opportunity just got in the way. I suppose I should try to talk to her, try to explain, but I keep telling myself that if she's angry enough, she'll talk to me." He chuckled sheepishly.

It was not anger that Louis read in Veronica's somber posture.

"It's probably best that you go your own directions," Louis said, in his most brotherly way. Bernd nodded with relief. The conversation shifted to other topics, and when Bernd wasn't looking, Louis slipped away toward the main hotel, heading for the glass double doors that Veronica had just vanished through.

* * *

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He caught up to her as she perused the hotel's Spanish galleon exhibit. He set one hand against the mizzenmast next to her.

"Veronica? It's been a long time."

She stared blankly at him. "Oh. Louis. I just saw some of your marine primate show."

"Ah, and did you like it?" he asked warmly. "I seem to recall seeing you enjoying one of the babies."

Her distant gaze suddenly sharpened, anchoring her in the present. But where Louis had expected a smile, a first breach through the wall of her melancholy, he found a rockhard aura of isolation.

"I recognize the approach," she said pointedly. "I'm happy that you and your reef gorillas have done so well for yourselves, but I really don't need any company right now."

"I was only—"

She pressed four slim fingers against his bare chest. "I know what you were doing, Master Sheldon. I'm not the same fool I was a hundred years ago. Sorry."

Louis stood anchored in place by the utter dismissal in her tone. She continued her tour into the cargo hold.

Blinking, shaking his head, Louis stalked out of the exhibit, and out of the hotel. He claimed an empty seat in an extreme corner of the beachfront patio, gave the waiter the coding for his favorite shitkicker Scotch—a single malt from a tiny village on the Isle of Skye—and settled back in the hope that the liquor would defuse his murderous frame of mind.

His mood only grew worse. Buried in his thoughts, he nearly swallowed an ice cube. A hundred years he'd waited. He'd become the fastest rising master of marine biology, candidate for adept in half the usual time. He'd refined the lines, the moves, the look. Right now, he could wander down to the beach and find twenty women eager to have him.

He would have made her feel good. She would've forgotten all about that wimp Bernd Hauser. She would have realized she'd made a mistake a century back, and he'd no longer have to acknowledge that, on one unique occasion, a woman had actually dumped him.

The weekend's success, the career-driven euphoria, drowned in the Scotch. It had become an incomplete success.

He was still brooding an hour later when the object of his thoughts strolled by in the distance, following a palm-lined path toward a small group of bungalows. His eyes smoldered as he tracked her. She disappeared into the third bungalow.

Even the woman's housing arrangements insulted him. Apprentices, journeymen, and masters like him had to squeeze into the hotel. Only maestros and adepts received detached dwellings. Without uttering a

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word, Veronica had just demonstrated that she was part of the elite, while he, in spite of his supreme efforts, lingered down in the struggling masses of this crowded planet of immortals.

Her own lonely dwelling. . . .

A smile took hold of Louis's lips and winched up the corners until he would have shamed a circus clown.

"Bernd!" Louis called. Sunset was casting long shadows out over the gulf as a large group of conference attendees converged on the hotel ballroom for a dinner business meeting. Louis stepped up to his colleague and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Hello again, Louis. Anything I can do for you?"

"Actually, there is. Are you going on the night dive out at the shoals?"

"Yes, I am."

Louis smiled, inwardly and out. "Good. If you see Hank Sauls out there, tell him I'm sorry I couldn't make it. I decided I needed more time to prepare for my speech tomorrow."

"Sure thing. Glad to help."

"Thanks."

As Louis removed his hand from Bernd's shoulder, he lifted away a stray hair that had lain there. After Louis found his seat at the banquet, he carefully placed the strand in a tiny inner pocket of his tuxedo, where it remained throughout the meal.

Louis left the business meeting early. He sequestered himself in his room and ordered the Link to refuse all calls.

As in all the better hotels, the bed also served as a full-sized nanoplayer, programmed to generate towels, toiletries, and a broad selection of attire. Louis set the hair he had taken from Bernd in the center of the mattress.

On the underside of the bedframe, where it was out of the way of guests but still readily accessible to the hotel's staff, he found the programming port.

Lying on the floor, staring at the blinking ready light of the device and its minuscule key pad, he hesitated. He was one action away from a major crime.

If he proceeded and got caught, he wouldn't be facing mere fines or imprisonment. They'd sentence him to a personality remorph. Like a retardate or a psychotic, he'd have his chemical levels balanced, his neural circuits redesigned. Worse, they'd tinker with the identity genome. He'd emerge "healthy and well-adjusted" according to the technicians in charge of the procedure, but he would not be the same person who went in. He'd be like all those hapless political victims back in the days before the passage of the Preservation of Identity Act.

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He drew in a breath. With one command from him, the bed scanned Bernd's hair for its genetic information. After a few considerably more complex instructions, Louis lay down and let the player go to work on him.

Louis's skin began to ripple. A hazel tone washed away the blue of his irises. His spine stretched, adding an inch to his height. He writhed, desperate to scratch, but before his willpower gave out, his flesh grew quiescent. The strange creak in his bones faded. He stood up and looked into the mirror.

The very image of Bernd Hauser gazed back at him.

Almost. The nose was a little different, the hairline drawn into the beginnings of a widow's peak. His morph was a clone of what Bernd would have looked like in early adulthood, without the customizations the man had overlaid upon it.

Not good enough. Louis called up Bernd's entry in the Baker edition of *Contemporary Marine Biologists* and funneled the visual parameters into the programming port. He lay back down and within seconds, his nose thinned, his hairline moved forward, several moles disappeared, and his complexion evened out.

There. Louis checked repeatedly. Yes. He looked as much like Bernd as Bernd did.

A little more programming, and he wore a print shirt of the same style as those he'd seen on Bernd many times. All that was left was to unbutton it and leave it untucked, in accord with Bernd's laid-back approach to his attire.

He grinned at the image in the mirror. He wouldn't get caught. It was as simple as that.

Louis lingered in the shadow of the palms that lined the walkway to Veronica's bungalow. He watched her outline glide across the closed blinds of her window. Mosquitoes whined in bloodlust and frustration as they tried to penetrate his personal body shield. Other than the insects' complaint, the only sound that reached his ears was the gentle rumble of the breakers against the nearby beach. No one was watching, and her silhouette indicated no companion in her quarters.

He strode to her door, and raised his hand to knock.

He savored the instant, knowing that this was the point when other men faltered. For him, the moment of commitment burned with a kiss almost as sweet as that of victory.

He tapped his knuckles lightly against the wood.

"Who is it?"

"It's Bernd."

Louis was deliciously aware of the pulse in his temples as he waited

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for her response. The very fact that she had not immediately told him to leave provided the opportunity for a thousand strategies.

He thought he heard the hum of a nanoplayer generating a garment. Seconds later, Veronica opened the door a bodywidth, and stood in the gap.

She wore a silk bathrobe. So—she did not want to be naked in front of Bernd Hauser, though she had no compunction about it in public that afternoon. Yet she positioned her body at an angle that permitted him an enticing view of her cleavage, and had chosen a style that made only a token effort at covering her thighs.

Vulnerable, cautious—but not inaccessible.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Do you want me to leave?"

She pulled her lips inward, between her teeth, and let them out again, a nervous gesture that did not fit her perfect features. "No. . . ."

"Can I come in?"

"I'm not sure your—Christine, is it?—would approve of you being here."

"This is between you and me," Louis said. "I . . . left some things unsaid."

"Yes, you did," she said, strain taking the breath from her voice. She inhaled suddenly, eyes watering. "You left a *lot* unsaid."

He reached out and cupped her neck. With one thumb, he stroked the soft, fine curls just behind her ear.

Her mouth parted. Her eyelids fluttered almost to closure.

"Let me come in," he said.

Veronica laughed tonelessly, without mirth. She stood aside. "I am so spineless."

Louis slid into the room. Veronica closed the door and turned to face him, shoulders slumped. The backed-up tears at last rolled down her cheeks.

Now, thought Louis. He had to move swiftly, take the initiative, before she considered longterm consequences, before logic overwhelmed her immediate need for emotional support.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm so sorry." He spread his arms.

Like a fly giving herself to the spider, she drew within his reach and allowed him to wrap her up. His steely, masculine hands pressed the fabric of her bathrobe into the muscles of her back. She leaned against him, her breath shifting the hairs of his chest, between clavicle and nipple. She moaned at the touch of his fingers massaging their way down her spine.

"I need to know that you don't hate me," he said, making his voice

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crack, the way poor, guilty Bernd Hauser's would have, had the real Bernd possessed the courage to utter those same words.

Veronica looked up. He tilted his head, until their mouths were poised barely far enough apart for her sentence to squeeze into the gap.

"Hating you is not the problem," she said.

He let her bridge the space. Their lips united. Her tongue probed tentatively, seeking the assurance of familiarity. He kissed her back firmly, letting passion override telltale differences between his touch and that of the real Bernd.

Her bathrobe drifted open. With it went any other barrier between Louis and his goal.

Veronica lingered in the bed while Louis slipped into his clothes. She watched him as intently as if she were a cat, and he a canary flitting about its nest. The scrutiny bothered him. He had to remind himself not to button the shirt.

"You're leaving already?" she asked.

Disappointment colored the words. He preferred to think that she was sorry to see him go, but in truth, those pensive eyebrows of hers had drawn together as soon as they'd finished making love.

No doubt Bernd would have talked more. Perhaps that was it. But Louis didn't dare say too much, or she might see through the façade. He'd had what he'd come for. It was time to get the hell out of there, before she became suspicious and asked the Net who he really was.

"I promised Christine I'd call her tonight. She's probably waiting already."

Veronica dropped her glance to the floor. "Of course," she said softly.

"I, uh . . ." Louis said, in his best imitation of Bernd's indecisiveness.

"Don't say it. Just go." She rolled away from him, and did not see him smile as he made his exit.

Back in his quarters, Louis immediately lay down on the bed and tripped the programs he'd pre-set. His morph reverted to his normal one. His clothes became the tux he'd worn to the banquet. Reaching under the bed to the programming port, he erased every one of his entries from the buffer.

He did not neglect to place Bernd's hair in the recycler and make sure it was deconstituted.

With luck, Veronica would never guess what had happened. But even if she did, just let her try to prove it. And then, remembering that he had a formal paper to deliver in the morning, he fell into deep, refreshing slumber.

* * *

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The auditorium hummed with the babble of the audience as Louis approached the podium, taking the place of the earlier speaker. The assemblage applauded him and settled down to listen.

Louis scanned the room. A good crowd—large, attentive. He basked in it, and began orating.

"Many of you here today have some cause, now and then, to use a bit of paleontology in your work. Even if you don't, I'm sure nearly all of you are aware of the aquatic ape concept. Sir Alister Hardy and Elaine Morgan's theory that early man must have spent several million years in a largely marine environment became doctrine even before the first fossil confirmation was brought to light. The question has remained —just how much did this oceanside environment alter the primates we are descended from, and how fast? By the time our ancestors returned to inland Africa, how close were they to modern man?"

Louis felt the respectful attention. He released the words in careful, measured doses. "My team addressed this question using the increasingly popular Berliner Method. With the guidance of archeogeneticist Mbebe Ongo, we created a small population of live apemen, just as they might have existed during the Pliocene drought, when diminishing primate habitats on the African continent forced them into the water, where they could find reliable safety and a plentiful source of food. With each pregnancy, we further manipulated genes in order to accelerate evolution, and have twice replaced the entire troop in order to make jumps in development."

Raising his eyes from his notes, Louis paused.

She was out there. He had spotted her as if magnetically drawn. She was seated in the upper left quarter of the audience, quietly observing, listening. She did not react to his glance, but for just a brief moment, he faltered, and was forced to check his prepared speech.

"We've found, just as the theory predicted, that our reconstructions began to take on features typical of modern humans almost from the moment the species adopted the aquatic lifestyle, achieving an early version of *Homo maritimus*, or reef apes, in the equivalent of less than a million years. . . "

When Louis next looked at Veronica Rizal, he did not stumble. She did not act like a woman hiding strong emotions. If anything, she seemed humble, the way she might look if she'd only just realized what a watermark Louis had reached in his career, and was sorry she'd rejected his invitation the previous afternoon.

How perfect, he thought. He sailed through the remainder of the talk. The audience gave him the longest applause yet heard at the conference, and for the rest of his stay in Baja California, he rode a wave of professional and sexual triumph.

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The next day, as he was leaving the conference, he failed to notice Veronica engaged in conversation with Bernd Hauser.

Helen Renault, Attorney-at-Law, considered increasing the intensity of her personal body shield, so tangible was the wave of anger coming from the woman whose virtual self sat on the other side of the desk.

"Veronica," Helen began slowly. "It's going to be hard to get a conviction."

"What do you mean? He was there in my room that night. The Net will confirm that."

The lawyer looked down. "Master Sheldon isn't denying that. But according to his attorney, he was there by your invitation, and whatever happened occurred with your full consent and cooperation."

"What?!"

If Veronica had been there in the flesh, rather than as a transmitted image, Helen would have taken her hands in hers and held them. "I want you to think very hard, before we've pressed charges, before it's public. I want you to picture the scenario as the jury or the D.A. might see it."

Veronica sank back in an invisible chair. Furrows rippled across her forehead. "Talk to me."

"First, there's your story: Sheldon impersonated your old lover and had sex with you under false pretenses."

"You make it sound so incidental."

"Let me finish," Helen said. "On the other side is Sheldon's story: You seemed interested in him, so he propositioned you and you accepted. After intercourse, he claims that you began to ask probing questions about his research, which he declined to answer. According to him, that made you angry, and you asked him to leave. Apparently he's arguing that your anger prompted you to fabricate a rape and impersonation story."

"Don't you think that's rather far-fetched?" Veronica countered.

Helen was perspiring, caught in a role she didn't want. Self-conscious, the lawyer sub-vocally cued her nanodocs to tone down her pores, even though Veronica couldn't detect the odor while in virtual mode.

"Yes and no," she replied. "It has been decades since you produced any truly significant research, Veronica. A good lawyer—and his is a maestro—might convince a jury that you wanted some sort of career boost out of Sheldon, and were desperate enough to seduce him, and, when that failed, to try to blackmail him with a rape case. You were known to be emotionally upset about your break-up with Bernd Hauser. An image could be constructed of an angry, unstable woman ready to lash out at a convenient target."

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Veronica opened her mouth, but closed it without speaking.

"We need something more than your word against his," the attorney continued. "Remember, we have to utterly convince the jury that our version of the events is the truth; all Sheldon's side has to do is raise 'reasonable doubt.' "

"And you don't think we can manage it," Veronica said stiffly.

Helen coughed. "Well, first off, neither you nor Master Sheldon asked the Net to record your encounter at the time it occurred, so the privacy parameter remained in effect. There is no document of what went on that night, except for the Net's location log. That proves both of you were in the bungalow, but it says nothing about what you did, or what either of you felt about those actions, and by design the log's only accurate to the nearest three meters."

"But we have the semen traces," Veronica interjected.

"Yes. But the analysis came back showing Sheldon's DNA pattern, not that of Bernd Hauser. That doesn't support your claim that he was disguised."

Veronica massaged her forehead, brows drawn tight. "He must not have altered his morph down to that level."

"Let's assume the jury believes that. And that they accept that the hair and particles of skin we retrieved from the bedding had been programmed to revert to their normal pattern upon being sloughed off. That's sophisticated stuff. Ordinarily only someone licensed in cosmetology could pull it off."

"You mean he had *help?*"

"Maybe. There's another way he could have done it. He may have learned remorphing in the process of creating his reef ape species. If so, he could have programmed the hotel nanoplayers to do his dirty work, without help from anyone."

"Surely we can prove he had that kind of training."

"Even if we do, it will only show *how* he might have done it, it won't prove *if* he did it."

Veronica sighed. "But Helen—it's what happened."

Helen choked down a sip of coffee and loosened the kinks in her shoulders, the kinks that told her Veronica was telling the truth. "I know. But as your lawyer, I have to advise you not to press charges."

"Why?"

"Using a nanoplayer to impersonate a human being is a mindwipe crime. The D.A. won't risk her maestro status for you unless she knows she can win. The defense will have extremely wide latitude. Judges just don't send someone to mindwipe without giving the person the fullest hearing possible. You'll be subject to the most ruthless kind of cross-examination. Any part of your personal history that might have a bearing on the case is fair game. Do you really want to be dragged through the shit, Veronica?"

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"I'm not ashamed of my life," the client replied.

"Let me spell it out. Your three biggest pieces of research, your claims to fame, were done in close collaboration with male colleagues."

"Yes. So?"

"Male colleagues who were your lovers at the time."

Veronica stiffened. "I don't meet many men outside my discipline. And I happen to be drawn to men I admire for their professional acumen."

Helen kept forcing out the words. "Imagine a brilliant attorney facing a jury, speaking eloquently of how you manipulated lovers into giving you credit for ideas which were largely their own. Imagine him pointing out that you and Louis Sheldon had once had a brief fling. Imagine a woman desperate to maintain her rank in her profession."

Helen ordered her desk to generate another cup of coffee. "Come on, Veronica. Going public is only going to magnify the incident out of proportion. He didn't hurt you. You even enjoyed it, apparently, before you discovered who was fucking you."

Veronica swayed, as if her bones had turned to air. "He made me an accessory to my own rape," she said, so softly that Helen scarcely made out the words.

"The point remains," the lawyer said, almost as softly, "that Louis Sheldon can hurt your reputation a lot more than an unproved accusation of nanoplayer misuse will hurt his. Short of an accomplice stepping forward out of the blue, the D.A. is not going to pursue the felony. Without the impersonation charge, the rape's just personal assault. That means if we pursue it as a civil case and lose, you're liable for false accusation. If Sheldon insisted, the judge could strip you down to journeyman. Do you really want to set back your career eighty or a hundred years?"

Veronica drew up her feet. Her arms curled around her elbows. Helen thought of a turtle, vanishing into its shell.

"It never changes," Veronica said, in a voice that dropped the bottom out of Helen's stomach.

"No, it doesn't," Helen whispered, knowing exactly what Veronica meant. For a long, bitter moment, she wished she were not such a persuasive lawyer.

Long after it had visually disappeared, Veronica's face seemed to float in front of Helen's desk. What had been hot anger on her arrival now lay deep behind those haunted eyes, a flame made into ice, as permanent and unstoppable as a glacier. Helen shivered, knowing that though the legal case had died unborn, the matter was not resolved.

When he stepped out of his research offices five years later, Louis had not thought of Veronica Rizal in a long time. She'd vanished from his sphere entirely after his lawyer had put a stop to a certain ineffective,

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behind-closed-doors attempt to block his confirmation to adept. Since then, his life had been busy. These days, his main concern was dealing with the frequent visitors to the hominid sanctuary—media personnel, tourists, colleagues looking to ride his coattails.

This day, there were no visitors. Louis had deliberately arranged a complete day of quiet. He'd sent the staff away as well, giving him the run of his small patch of paradise. He waded into the shallows with a cheerful, confident stride, master of his domain.

The sun was well up over the East African coast, and most of Louis's troop of reef apes had taken to the water to cool off and to forage for mollusks and seaweed. The primates acknowledged his arrival with glances and low hoots. He assumed his usual observational distance, close by the edge of the group, but not within it.

Three young males had apparently discovered something exciting. They flailed their arms, shouted, and repeatedly dived into the chest-deep waters. Louis dunked his head and peered through the transparent sea to where the males romped.

One of the apes grabbed at the side of a submarine rock. The object of interest was a large abalone, a real prize for any member of the troop. The ape tried to yank the shellfish free. Failing, he rose for a breath, and one of his companions replaced him.

The second ape, who Louis had named Otto, got a firm hold almost immediately. The abalone peeled free. Louis surfaced.

Otto came up brandishing his treasure, a radiant smile on his face. His competitors turned to the remainder of the troop and raised even more racket than he, as if to borrow some of the glory by mere enthusiasm.

Otto rewarded the pair with shreds of abalone flesh, took a larger piece to the alpha male, and climbed onto a dry projection of reef. Sara, one of the females, unabashedly courted Otto's favor.

Even after decades of studying the animals, whenever Louis witnessed a smile such as the one on Otto's face, he was amazed at how human the species could seem. Subcutaneous fat smoothed out the wrinkles typical of chimp or gorilla faces. Under the mop of scalp hair, Otto's brown face displayed only the faintest traces of hair. His nostrils, instead of pointing skyward, hid beneath a true nose.

Louis had to smile himself. He appreciated the forthrightness of reef apes. They kept their emotions near the surface, easy to read, like children. Compared to the currents and eddies of human interaction, Louis found it soothing to walk among them.

Which was why he was not alarmed to note that one of the males seemed to be shadowing him.

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It was Jerry, a large but relatively timid male. He was much closer than any of the troop usually came.

Louis faced him, making sure not to challenge through eye-to-eye contact. Jerry pretended to be examining a strand of kelp for tiny snails. His calculated indifference indicated non-hostile intent. Louis turned back to the main portion of the troop.

Then it occurred to him that he had just seen Jerry back on the beach, taking sand baths with several of his siblings. How had he come so far into the water so quickly?

Louis glanced toward shore. To his shock, he saw Jerry still among the dunes, happily playing. Which meant the reef ape near him—

—was a fake.

He whirled, opening his mouth to raise his personal body shield to maximum, but the primate, having closed the gap, cuffed him on the side of the head. Louis swayed, unable to resist as Jerry dunked him under the surface.

Something needle-sharp plunged into his neck. Louis inhaled salt water. He thrashed, but iron hands held him by the hair at the back of his head. The ersatz Jerry, every bit as strong as the real one, dragged him halfway toward the beach before Louis gained the composure to attempt to sub-vocally issue orders—to raise his shield, and to ask the Net to initiate a recording.

It didn't work. Trembling with a whole new level of fear, Louis realized that his tongue and vocal cords had been paralyzed. He struggled doubly hard to get free. He managed to lift his head from the water, gaining just enough time to cough before his assailant shoved him under again.

By the time they reached the shore, Louis was half-conscious, able only to retch and to strain for air. Jerry dragged him up on the sand.

Louis's head began to clear. He wriggled free and made it two steps before being slammed into the grit. Jerry grabbed Louis's right arm and broke it, and while Louis vomited into the sand, the ape broke the left one.

Louis screamed.

Easily restraining Louis's wrists with one hand, Jerry leaned down to face his captive. If any doubts had remained that this might be a genuine reef ape, they dissolved into the pupils of those dark eyes.

With a stubby forefinger, Jerry wrote four words into the wet sand beside Louis's head: "Your word against mine."

Louis writhed, acrid sweat popping from his armpits. He understood. A vision of the next hour flashed before his eyes: Veronica bashing him on the rocks, breaking his knees, and doing God knew what else before she finally drowned him. She might even wait around for his nanodocs to repair him, and kill him two or three times more.

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She held him down, letting the ramifications of the situation sink in. He began to whimper. She couldn't possibly get away with it.

Sure I can, said the dark eyes. Panting, searching for anything to keep his mind away from the agony, it came to him: It was no felony to impersonate a reef ape.

A brief twist of his limbs sent a broken splinter of bone out of his skin. Louis thrashed, tongue rolling in the sand and puke. The prospect of a court case, assuming he dared expose to the public how skillfully she had taken her revenge, offered no solace. It was part of the unreachable future. In the here-and-now, his body suffered, he had not yet died and been repaired. Ahead was the longest hour of his life.

The surf washed away the sentence in the sand. The bone of the other arm emerged into the air. ●

WHAT TREES DREAM ABOUT IN THEIR PRODIGIOUS SILENCE

Soft flesh of the earth.
Breath of sun on their leaves.

Embrace of wind in their branches.
Burning bite of the logger's blade

as it sears them to the core.
Their dreams are their lives

and their lives are like dreams.
Each winter they eat the snow

that melts in their branches.
They dream-taste the ashen sky.

—Bruce Boston

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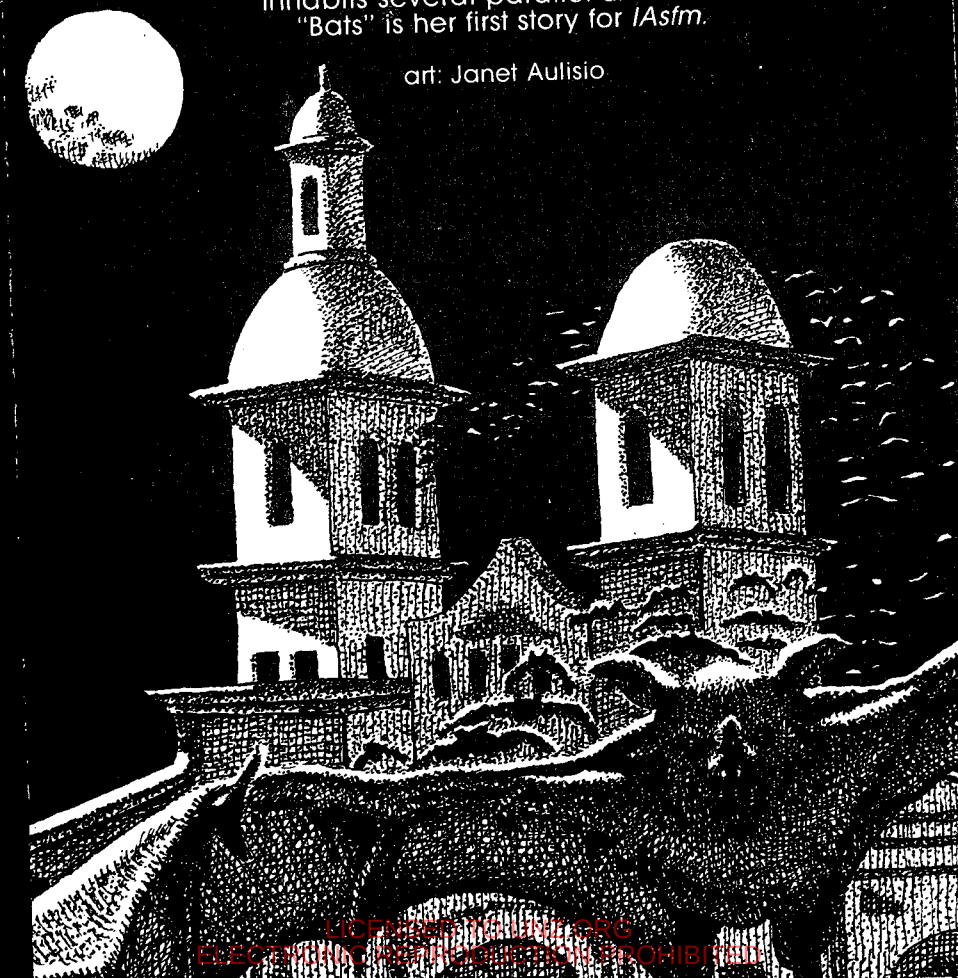
BATS

Diane de Avalle-Arce

Diane de Avalle-Arce tells us she "is a refugee from the East Coast, universities, and the twentieth century. I write novels at the edge of Los Padres National Forest, in the company of a cat that inhabits several parallel universes." "Bats" is her first story for *IAsfm.*

art: Janet Aulisio



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It was the old and cruel custom of the shoeshine boys of Guanajuato, when they had no pressing matters on hand, to catch a bat and make it smoke. You nail the bat to a board fence, by each wing, and put a lit cigarette in the mouth as it opens in a soundless shriek. The tip of the cigarette glows and smoke curls out of the bat's nostrils, as though it were enjoying a gringo's *rubio* tobacco.

This is no longer done, by order of Manuel Aceves, chief among the shoeshine boys of the barrio of San Martin. Rose, the lady who wore white gloves, had something to do with it, and so (though he never made the connection) did Dr. Murphy, a prominent physician in the American colony. Rufina, who keeps the Bar Zotzil on top of La Valenciana, might claim some credit, but she and the grey cat have enough to do without concerning themselves about such things.

It was and is the custom for the gringos to emerge from their pink villas on the outskirts of Guanajuato just before sundown, and drive up to La Valenciana for their evening drink. They admire the view and complain about the laundress and the lack of parts for their cars. This being the hour when the hand is more willing to reach into the pocket and extend a bill, not waiting for change, Manuel Aceves with his shoeshine kit was accustomed to climb the stone steps zig-zagging up the hill to the mine, cutting the loops of the road between nopales and yucca.

The evening of his revelation, he was late; it was nearly dark, and the ground was cold in the shadow of the hill, although the sun behind the mountain gilded the twin towers of the church of La Valenciana. Manuel usually pretended he was the Emperor Moctezuma climbing the Great Temple of the Sun—though he is all four quarterings Chichimeca of Guanajuato and proud of it—but this evening he forgot the Emperor Moctezuma, watching the bats leaving the church.

They came out in a thin spiral, like smoke rising from a small fire, then in a twisted column, a pillar growing upward, larger at the top like a funnel, spinning faster and faster. The funnel danced back and forth as the wind pushed it, until the bats streamed out eastward in a cloud, passing over his head. He heard the hissing of hundreds of thousands of little wings, making a downdraft of warm ammoniac air around him. Still the bats poured out, the long cloud like the plumed serpent Quetzalcoatl, while the sky behind the mountain turned from gold to red to the clear cold green that precedes the deep indigo of night.

Already the church looked a horned bulky animal asleep, and the Cafe Zotzil crouched at its foot like a smaller animal with open glowing eyes, when Manuel Aceves humped his shoeshine box into the bar. The place was almost full, with only Rufina to run back and forth with drinks, while the grey cat minded the bar under the grinning mask of Zotzil the Bat God.

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Manuel ordered a Coca Cola, and Rufina threw a dishrag at him and said she hoped that Zotzil would eat him.

"Come, Rufina," he said, "the old gods are dead. The Spaniards killed them. Then we Chichimecas killed the Spaniards, until we got tired of it, and when we wish, we will kill the gringos, too."

"Throw yourself in the well," responded Rufina, loading her tray.

The Bar Zotzil was the old well-house of La Valenciana mine, when the mine had produced silver enough to build and decorate a hundred churches a year. Those times were long gone. The mine was sealed and the church empty, but the well was still there: a hole five meters wide in the floor, with a railing. Green water rushed past the hole, over a pale sand bottom. There were no fish, but the grey cat watched the water just in case, and the gringos threw cigarette butts in it.

Manuel shrugged and made a face at Rufina's back, then composed his smooth copper mask for business. Dr. Murphy first. Grey laceless shoes with tassels on them, grey pants and jacket, grey hair, grey face with purple veins. Dr. Murphy drank whiskey in the Bar Zotzil from sundown until the bar closed, although he slept much of the time. Manuel flashed his smile and said, "Shine? Shine?" Without waiting for the answer, he went to work with his rags.

Before he'd finished, *la señora* Carol sat down at the table. A pink lady, hair like a cornfield in stubble. Manuel had once thought of charging her extra because her feet were so long. Her shoes were pink lizards, which gave him pause for thought. Rummaging through his box, he listened to the conversation; Manuel understood more English than he let on.

They talked about the restoration of the church, which *la señora* Carol said was a project close to her heart. Manuel did not think gringos had hearts, not like people had. Restoring the church was not close to Manuel's heart, but if more tourists came to the area because of it, he wanted their business. On the other hand, if the Minister of Culture came to declare the church a Historical Monument, beggars and shoeshine boys and women selling lace tablecloths from baskets would be banished. So he listened carefully. *La señora* Carol wanted Dr. Murphy to contribute to the fund for illuminating the church.

"To shine like a good deed in a naughty world?" said Dr. Murphy. "It's a robber baron's bad conscience construed in masonry. That's all it amounts to. Leave it to the bats."

"Ugh," said the lady, fanning herself with a paper napkin. "I can't *bear* bats. The illumination should get rid of them if it does nothing else. Do you think the Board of Health would bear part of the cost?"

"Why?" said Dr. Murphy. He finished his whiskey. "If they ask me, I'll

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tell 'em more people die in a year of church-picnic potato-salad than of bat-related disease in a century."

"You can't be serious. What about *vampire* bats, which I hope those aren't? Don't the cattle ranchers—"

"If the cow had the choice of providing *you* with a steak dinner, or a *bat* with an ounce of blood, she'd choose to accommodate the bat! Rufina! Another of these. Why, the bat's saliva is an anti-coagulant with antibiotic properties, she'd be none the worse. Whereas the *steak*—"

"Phillip, you do have the oddest take on things! I hope you're not going to set yourself up against the whole North American community *just* when we're doing something that will really make a difference!"

Manuel finished the shoes with his brightest smile and held out his dirty hand, which *la señora* Carol pretended not to see. Dr. Murphy gave him a five-hundred-peso bill and said to keep the change, which would have been better if it were not a one-hundred-peso bill with false corners pasted on it. Manuel sincerely hoped he gave money like that to *la señora* Carol for her restoration fund.

He looked around for more customers, but it was a bad evening for shoes; in dry weather, the dust of the brown hills does not cling to the mirror-surface of shoes shined by Manuel the previous evening. Helping himself to a Coke behind Rufina's back, he settled on his heels in a corner.

" 'Oh, fat white woman whom nobody loves, why do you walk through the fields in gloves?' " said Dr. Murphy through his teeth in a funny way.

Rose—the gringa round like a squash or a real person, instead of chili-shaped like the other gringos—came in like a cow with staggers and dropped into a chair. She was as red as her namesake, and pressed both her gloved hands against her breastbone; slowly, she turned white as trout-bellies.

The other gringos didn't like Rose because she lived in the town, over the shop that sells silver and turquoise birds, and gave pesos to street children and told them to go to school.

"Have a glass of water—where are your *pills*, for God's sake?"

Rose shook her head. She took a fish head out of a plastic bag and put it under her chair for the grey cat. "I can't, I told you—I can't take the pills. If I take them, I can't sleep."

"Your blood pressure is literally killing you," Dr. Murphy snapped. The grey hand trembled with the glass. "I can't understand how you've survived *this* long."

La señora Carol changed the subject, because gringos don't believe in death. They never take food to the *animas* for the Day of the Dead, *never*. Manuel knew.

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"Do you know you've come just in time to see the illumination of La Valenciana? Any minute now they'll turn on the lights!"

Rose looked even sicker. "Tonight?" she said in a thread of a voice. "I thought it was next month?"

"Oh, the mayor and the American consul, and just possibly the Minister of Culture, will come next month, for the dedication of the plaque crediting the American colony. But the outside illumination is ready. It'll be wonderful, just you wait and see."

But Rose was up and blundering into the rail of the well. She grasped it and looked around. Manuel, with an eye to opportunity, was at her elbow in a moment.

She flinched, then leaned on the hard dirty little arm. "You're Manuel, aren't you? I have a job for you, if you won't be afraid."

"I, afraid? Manuel Aceves is pure Chichimeca, and the meanest shoeshine boy in barrio San Martin!"

"I thought so," said Rose.

Rufina appeared. "Does the *señora* wish to lie down?"

"No," said Rose. "Manuel and I are going to the church now."

"It will be locked, *señora*. The workmen are all gone."

"That's all right," said Rose, taking a big iron key out of her bag.

Manuel, piloting the lady out of the Bar Zotzil, was not surprised that she had a key to the church. If you pay enough, you can have the key to anything you want. But why? There was nothing of value in La Valenciana. Or *was* there? Did the gringa know of hidden treasure under the altar? Who knew what the old Spaniards might have hidden in the church, under tons of bat guano in the belfries? Manuel's step quickened.

Outside the yellow fan of light from the doorway, it was dark as Rufina's braid, although the stars blazed long trails overhead.

"The side door," said Rose. "This one."

Inside the church, it was dark as a mine. Only the high altar glinted gold from the windows, a blind naked cherub with yellow curls here, the halo of a saint there. But Rose seemed to know her way, unsteady but determined, and Manuel half-followed and half-supported her up a winding stair behind the stone baptistry. They went up and up, and Manuel realized they must be climbing the west tower.

At the top there was a door, unlocked, and Rose pushed it open. Her breathing was shallow and rapid, but Manuel held his breath, looking for the treasure. There would be gold, and silver, and emeralds, and rubies, and pearls! He would take it and buy the whole city of Guanajuato, like a plate of glazed salt-clay food for the Day of the Dead: the Market and the Fort with the Mummies; the streets full of businessmen in suits the color of flour; the taxis and buses and the cars of the gringos; the policemen and their carbines; schools and banks and bars, and houses

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where the women wore paint and laughed so loud you could hear them all over the barrio.

But he could see nothing in the tower but the grey rectangle of the louvers, though he knew they must be under the bell-mouths, huge and black. He smelled cold bronze, and dust, ammonia, the plastic coverings of new electrical wires. Rose tripped on something and her full weight on his shoulder made him stagger. She rummaged in her bag.

"Thank you, Manuel. You can go now. Here's a hundred *pesos*." She snapped on a little flashlight with a cloth tied over the glass. Huge flickering shadows sprang up on the walls, two figures drawn up to dizzy height, crossed by black bars of beams, blurry with cobwebs and inches of dust. There were footprints in the dust on the floor as if it were sand, workmen's boots, Rose's shoes with heels, Manuel's bare feet, rat-paws, and some marks that were none of these.

Rose sat down cross-legged, with a gasp. "Can't you find your way out, Manuel? I don't need any more help now."

"I want to stay, *señora*, truly." For Manuel was Chichimeca of Guanajuato, and any treasure there might be was his as much as anyone's.

"All right, if you won't be frightened."

Manuel, *frightened?* Never since he could remember.

Rose was speaking in a low voice, he did not know whether to herself or to him, making no move toward where treasure might be hidden. He could see no sign of it.

"The lights," she said. "They've put floodlights all over, and opened the louvers. It will be light day and night. You won't stay here, Jimmy; you can't. This will be the last time. Jimmy?"

Manuel, squatting on his heels, watching, wondered if she might be wandering in her wits, for she had drunk no whisky nor even beer at the Bar Zotzil. She took off her gloves and pushed up the yellow sleeve of her blouse. She stretched out the left arm, trembling, with the back of the hand resting on the floor. And such an arm: pale as melon, mottled with red and violet, the blue veins twisting the bone from which the flesh hung slack.

She whistled. It was a high thin sound, as to a very small dog. Manuel followed her eyes and saw a bat, not hanging but right side up, crouched in the angle of a rafter. The flashlight beam showed its pug-dog face with ears pricked, wings like an umbrella half-unfolded. The mouth opened candy-pink, but what struck Manuel most was the unblinking black eyes that didn't reflect like an animal's at night.

"Here, Jimmy," whispered Rose, and the bat dropped to the floor in a brief flutter of membrane-wings as wide as Manuel's forearm was long.

He almost thought he heard it answer, like a feather in his ear. He was so afraid he crossed himself, as he had not done since his mother

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died, but it was no good, a bat that lived in the bells of a church must have no fear of anything.

The bat hitched itself along the floor on its rat-feet, helping with the long wing-thumbs. Manuel did not move, and every detail printed itself on his memory, like a painting on glass. The bat looked at him, looked into his eyes as no animal could do, nor any rich person in a cafe, and saw *him*, Manuel Aceves as he was, and opened its mouth. It had tiny sharp teeth, like thorns.

"Hold still," whispered Rose. "He's nervous of you."

And Manuel held still as though a spell were on him, because here was the Bat God Zotzil in the tower of the church of La Valenciana, and he had never believed in either of them.

The bat came with its humping gait, and climbed onto Rose's fingers. The hand lay quiet but the blue veins quivered and rolled over each other. The bat nuzzled her wrist, here and there, and held to it. Rose breathed, low and steady, many times, as it sucked the vein.

At last she put out her other hand, and, with her finger, stroked the bat, like Rufina stroking her cat when she was in a good mood. The bat arched its head back, and Manuel saw a mark like ink on Rose's wrist. It didn't bleed.

"This is Jimmy," she said. "Several of them will come, but he's the only one I can pet. See if he'll let you."

And then Manuel proved he was who he was. He stretched out his own dark paw and touched the bat, like warm silk, like the finest glove leather, and felt its heart beating, and heard Rose's harsh breathing and his own in the moment before the floodlights went on, brighter than day.

No one noticed their return to the Cafe Zotzil but Rufina, because all the gringos were admiring the illuminated façade of La Valenciana—except Dr. Murphy, who was asleep in his chair with his head on the table. Manuel removed some hundreds of thousands of *pesos* from his pocket and from the handbag of *la señora* Carol, under the indifferent gaze of the grey cat, and slipped down the hill in the darkness.

There was after all no treasure, and Rose was right that the bats would never come back to La Valenciana. She died some weeks later of a heart attack in the rooms over the shop that sold silver and turquoise birds. Manuel was sorry. By then he was no longer a shoeshine boy, but a boarder in the school of the Aescolapian Brothers, because a man of power, a man who has touched the heart of the world and seen it is far, far bigger than Guanajuato, must have the education to rise above the barrio San Martin. ●

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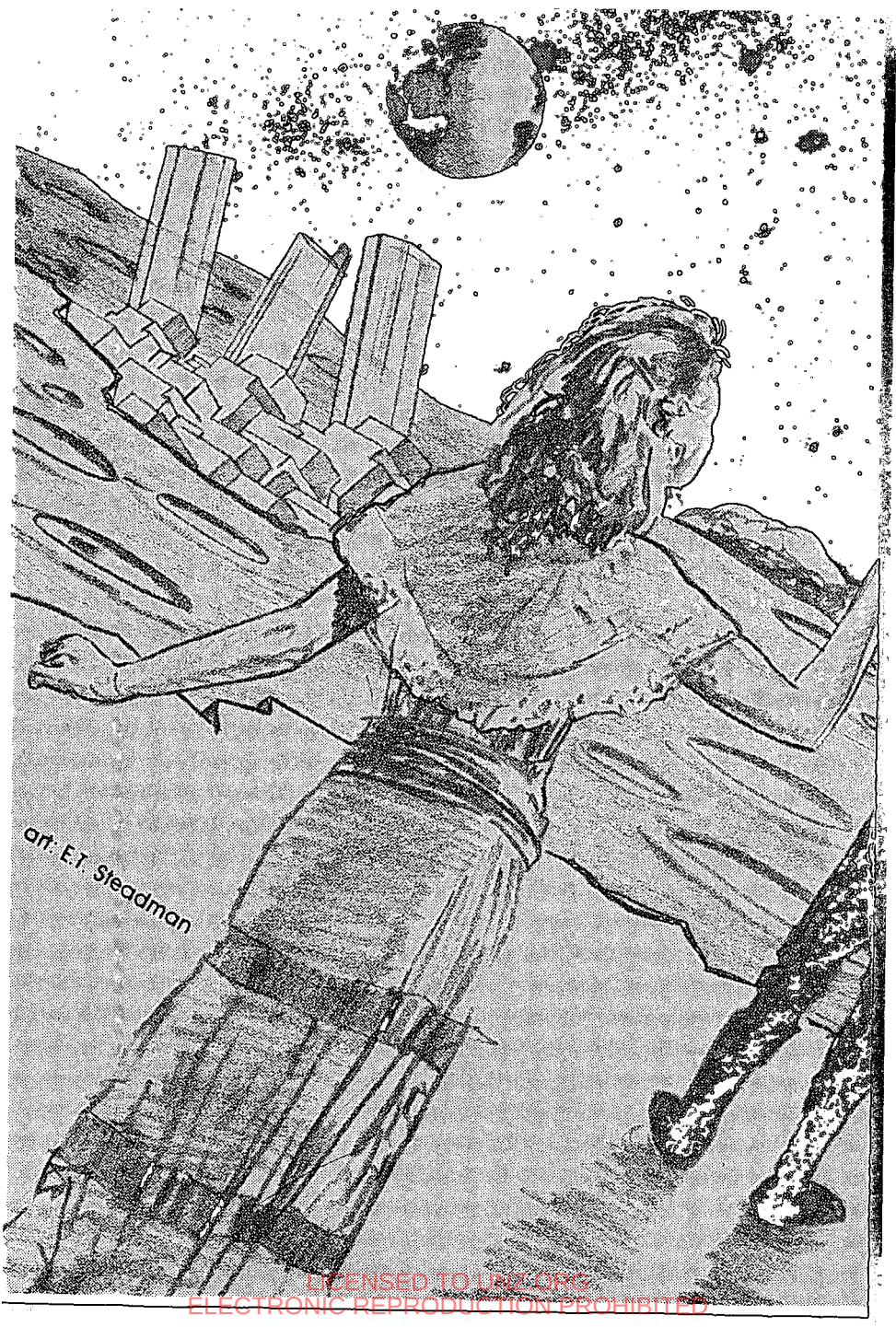

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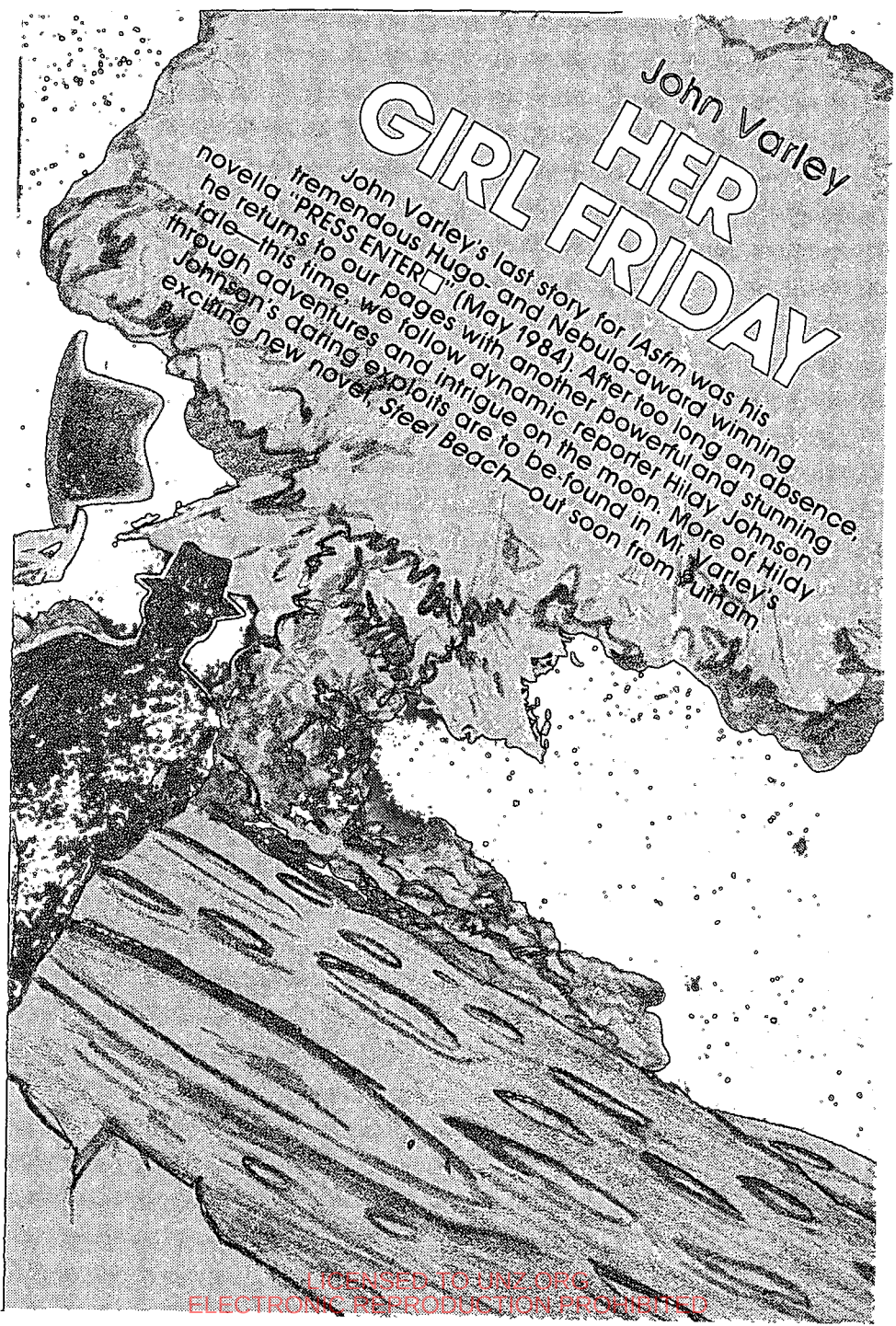
John Varley
HER GIRL FRIDAY
John Varley's last story for IAsfm was his tremendous Hugo- and Nebula-award winning novella "PRESS ENTER■" (May 1984). After too long an absence, he returns to our pages with another powerful and stunning tale—this time, we follow dynamic reporter Hildy Johnson through adventures and intrigue on the moon. More of Hildy Johnson's daring exploits are to be found in Mr. Varley's exciting new novel, Steel Beach—out soon from Putnam
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Like all disneylands, Oregon was a huge hemispherical bubble, more or less flat on the bottom, the curved roof painted blue. The first ones had been only a kilometer or two across, but as the engineers figured out better ways to support them, the newer ones were growing with no outer limit in sight. Oregon was one of the biggest, along with two others currently under construction: Kansas and Borneo. Fox tried his best not to bore me with statistics; I simply forget them a few minutes after hearing them. Suffice it to say the place was *very* big.

I'm Hildy Johnson, star reporter for the *News Nipple*. I was a woman again these days, after some years as a man, and I had an idea that my old friend Fox, one of the top construction engineers in Luna, was after more than publicity when he suggested that we go on a picnic in Oregon to see how the disneyland was shaping up. Not that I minded.

The floor was mostly rock and dirt shaped into hills and two mountains. The one he'd called Mount Hood was tall and sharply pointed. The other was truncated and looked unfinished.

"That's going to be a volcano," he said. "Or at least a good approximation of an active volcano. There was an eruption in this area in historic times."

"You mean lava and fire and smoke?"

"I wish we could. But the power requirements to melt enough rock for a worthwhile eruption would bust the budget, plus any really good volume of smoke would hurt the trees and wildlife. What it's going to do is vent steam three or four times a day and shoot sparks at night. Should be real pretty. The project manager's trying to convince the money people to fund a yearly ash plume—nothing catastrophic, it actually benefits the trees. And I'm pretty sure we'll be able to mount a modest lava flow every ten or twenty years."

"I wish I could see it better. It's pretty dim in here." The only real light sources were at the scattered tree farms, dots of bright green in the blasted landscape.

"Let me get the sun turned on." He picked up a mike and talked to the power section, and a few minutes later the "sun" flickered and then blazed directly overhead.

"All this will be covered in virgin forest; green as far as the eye can see. Not at all like your shack in Texas. This is a wet, cool climate, lots of snow in higher elevations. Mostly conifers. We're even putting in a grove of sequoias down in the south part, though we're fudging a bit on that, geographically speaking."

"Green'd be a lot better than this," I said.

"You'll never be a true West Texan, Hildy," he told me, and smiled.

He set us down on the Columbia River, at the mouth of the gorge where it was wider and slower, on a broad, flat sandbar of an island which was the center of what he called an ecological test-bed. The beach was wide and hard-packed, full of frozen ripples. Across the river were the advertised pine trees, but near us there was only estuarine vegetation, the sort of plants that didn't mind being flooded periodically. It ran

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to tall skinny grasses and low, hardy bushes, few taller than my head. There were some really huge logs half buried in the sand, bleached gray-white and rubbed smooth and round by sun, wind, and water. I realized they were artificial, put there to impress the occasional visitors, who were always brought here.

We spread out a blanket on the sand and sat there gorging ourselves on the food mountain of sushi and tempura we'd brought. He stuck mostly to the shrimpoid tempura while I concentrated on the maguro, uni, hamachi, toro, tako, and paper-thin slices of fugu. I dredged each piece in enough of that wonderful green horseradish to make my nose run and my ears turn bright red. Then we made love, slow and tender for the first hour, getting intense near the end. We stretched out in the sun and never quite fell asleep, just lolling like satiated reptiles.

Afterward, we showered off the sand and he asked if I'd like to see a scheduled blast in Kansas. I'd never seen a nuke before, so I said yes. He flew the trailer to a lock, and we emerged on the surface, where he turned control over to the autopilot and told me about some of the things he'd been doing in other disneylands as we looked at the airless beauty falling away beneath us.

Maybe you have to be there to appreciate Fox's weather sculpture. He rhapsodized about ice storms and blizzards he'd created, and it meant nothing to me. But he did pique my interest. I told him I'd attend his next showing. I wondered if he was angling for coverage in the *Nipple*. Well, I've got a suspicious mind, and I'd been right about things like that often enough. I couldn't figure a way to make it interesting to my readership unless somebody famous attended, or something violent and horrible happened there.

Oregon was a showplace compared to Kansas. I'd like to have had a piece of the dust concession.

They were still in the process of excavation. The half-dome was nearly complete, with just some relatively small areas near the north edge to blast away. Fox said the best vantage point would be near the west edge; if we'd gone all the way to the south the dust would have obscured the blast too much to make the trip worthwhile. He landed the trailer near an untidy cluster of similar modular mobile homes and we joined a group of a few dozen other fireworks fans.

This show was strictly "to the trade." Everyone but me was a construction engineer; this sort of thing was not open to the public. Not that it was really rare. Kansas had required thousands of blasts like this, and would need about a hundred more before it was complete. Fox described it as the best-kept secret in Luna.

"It's not really much of a blast as these things go," he said. "The really big ones would jolt the structure too much. But when we're starting out, we use charges about ten times larger than this one."

I noticed the "we." He really did want to build these places instead of just install and run the weather machines.

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"Is it dangerous?"

"That's sort of a relative question. It's not as safe as sleeping in your bed. But these things are calculated to a fare-thee-well. We haven't had a blasting accident in thirty years." He went on to tell me more than I'd wanted to know about the elaborate precautions, things like radar to detect big chunks of rock that might be heading our way, and lasers to vaporize them. He had me completely reassured, and then he had to go and spoil it.

"If I say run," he said, seriously, "hop in the trailer, pronto."

"Do I need to protect my eyes?"

"Clear leaded glass will do it. It's the UV that burns. Expect a certain dazzle effect at first. Hell, Hildy, if it blinds you the company's insurance will get you some new eyes."

I was perfectly happy with the eyes I had. I began to wonder if it had been such a good idea, coming here. I resolved to look away for the first several seconds. Common human lore was heavy with stories of what could happen to you in a nuclear explosion, dating all the way back to Old Earth, when they'd used a few of them to fry their fellow beings by the millions.

The traditional countdown began at ten. I put on the safety glasses and closed my eyes at two. So naturally I opened them when the light shone through my eyelids. There was a dazzle, as he'd said, but my eyes quickly recovered. How to describe something that bright? Put all the bright lights you ever saw into one place, and it wouldn't begin to touch the intensity of that light. Then there was the ground shock, and the air shock, and finally, much later, the sound. I mean, I thought I'd been *hearing* the sound of it, but that was the shock waves emanating from the ground. The sound in the air was much more impressive. Then the wind. And the fiery cloud. The whole thing took several minutes to unfold. When the flames had died away there was a scattering of applause and a few shouts. I turned to Fox and grinned at him, and he was grinning, too.

Twenty kilometers away, a thousand people were already dead in what came to be called the Kansas Collapse.

None of us were aware of the disaster at the time.

We drank a toast in champagne, a tradition among these engineering people. Within ten minutes Fox and I were back in the trailer and heading for an air lock. He said the fastest way back to King City was on the surface, and that was fine with me. I didn't enjoy driving through the system of tunnels that honeycombed the rock around a disneyland.

We had no sooner emerged into the sunlight than the trailer was taken over by the autopilot, which informed us that we would have to enter a holding pattern or land, since all traffic was being cleared for emergency vehicles. A few of these streaked silently past us, blue lights flashing.

Neither of us could remember an emergency of this apparent size on the surface. There were occasional pressure losses in the warrens, of

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course. No system is perfect. But loss of life in these accidents was rare. So we turned on the radio, and what we heard sent me searching through Fox's belongings in the back of the trailer until I came up with a newspad. It was the *Straight Shit*, and in other circumstances I would have teased him unmercifully about that. But the story that came over the pad was the type that made any snide remarks die in one's throat.

There had been a major blowout at a surface resort called Nirvana. First reports indicated some loss of life, and live pictures from security cameras—all that was available for the first ten minutes we watched—showed bodies lying motionless by a large swimming pool. The pool was bubbling violently. At first we thought it was a big jacuzzi, then we realized with a shock that the water was boiling. Which meant there was no air in there, and those people were certainly dead. Their postures were odd, too. They all seemed to be holding on to something, such as a table leg or a heavy concrete planter with a palm tree.

A story like that evolves in its own fractured way. First reports are always sketchy, and usually wrong. We heard estimates of twenty dead, then fifty, then, spoken in awe, two hundred. Then those reports were denied, but I had counted thirty corpses myself. It was maddening. We're spoiled by instant coverage, we expect news stories to be cogent, prompt, and nicely framed by steady cameras. These cameras were steady, all right. They were immobile, and after a few minutes your mind *screamed* for them to pan, just a little bit, so you could see what was just out of sight. But that didn't happen until about ten minutes after we landed, ten minutes that seemed like an hour.

At first I think it affected me more than Fox. He was shocked and horrified, naturally, and so was I, on one level. The other level, the newshound, was seething with impatience, querying the autopilot three times a minute when we could get up and *out* of there so I could go cover the story. It's not pretty, I know, but any reporter will understand the impulse. You want to *move*. You tuck the horror of the images away in some part of your mind where police and coroners put ugly things, and your pulse pounds with impatience to get the next detail, and the next, and the next. To be stuck on the ground fifteen klicks away was torture of the worst kind.

Then a fact was mentioned that made it all too real for Fox. I didn't catch its importance. I just looked over at him and saw his face had gone white and his hands were trembling.

"What's the matter?" I said.

"The time," he whispered. "They just mentioned the time of the blowout."

I listened, and the announcer said it again.

"Was that . . . ?"

"Yes. It was within a second of the blast."

I was still so preoccupied with wanting to get to Nirvana that it was a full minute before I realized what I *should* be doing. Then I turned on Fox's phone and called the *Nipple*, using my second-highest urgency code

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to guarantee quick access to Walter. The top code, he had told me, was reserved for filing on the end of the universe, or an exclusive interview with Elvis.

"Walter, I've got footage of the cause of the blowout," I said, when his ugly face appeared on the screen.

"The cause? You were *there?* I thought everybody—"

"No, I wasn't there. I was in Kansas. I have reason to believe the disaster was set off by a nuclear explosion I was watching in Kansas."

"It sounds unlikely. Are you sure—"

"Walter, it *has* to be, or else it's the biggest coincidence since that straight flush I beat your full house with."

"That was no coincidence."

"Damn right it wasn't, and someday I'll tell you how I did it. Meantime, you've wasted twenty seconds of valuable newstime. Run it with a disclaimer if you want to, you know, 'Could this have been the cause of the tragedy in Nirvana?' "

"Give it to me."

I fumbled around on the dash, and swore under my breath. "Where's the neurofeed on this damn thing?" I asked Fox. He was looking at me strangely, but he pulled a wire from a recessed compartment. I fumbled it into my occipital socket, and said the magic words that caused the crystalline memory to recycle and spew forth the last six hours of holocam recordings in five seconds.

"Where the hell are you, anyway?" Walter was saying. "I've had a call out for you for twenty minutes."

I told him, and he said he'd get on it. Thirty seconds later the autopilot was cleared into the traffic pattern. The press has some clout in situations like this, but I hadn't been able to apply it from my beached position. We rose into the sky . . . and turned the wrong way.

"What the hell are you doing?" I asked Fox incredulously.

"Going back to King City," he said quietly. "I have no desire to witness any of what we've seen first-hand. And I especially don't want to witness you covering it."

I was about to blast him out of his seat, but I took another look, and he looked dangerous. I had the feeling that one more word from me would unleash something I didn't want to hear, and maybe even more than that. So I swallowed it, mentally calculating how long it would take me to get back to Nirvana from the nearest King City air lock.

With a great effort I pulled myself out of reportorial mode and tried to act like a human being. Surely I could do it for a few minutes, I thought.

"You can't be thinking you had anything to do with this," I said. He kept his eyes forward, as if he really had to see where the trailer was going. "You told me yourself—"

"Look, Hildy. I didn't set the charge, I didn't do the calculations. But some of my friends did. And it's going to reflect on all of us. Right now I have to get onto the phone, we're going to have to try and find out what went wrong. And I do feel responsible, so don't try to argue me out of it,

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because I know it isn't logical. I just wish you wouldn't talk to me right now."

I didn't. A few minutes later he smashed his fist into the dashboard and said, "I keep remembering us standing around watching. Cheering. I can still taste the champagne."

I got out at the airlock, flagged a taxi, and told it to take me to Nirvana.

Most disasters look eminently preventable in hindsight. If only the warnings had been heeded, if only this safety measure had been implemented, if only somebody had thought of this possibility, if only, if only. I exempt the so-called acts of God, which used to include things like earthquakes, hurricanes, and meteor strikes. But hurricanes are infrequent on Luna. Moon quakes are almost as rare, and selenography is exact enough to predict them with a high degree of accuracy. Meteors come on very fast and very hard, but their numbers are small and their average size is tiny, and all vulnerable structures are ringed with radars powerful enough to detect any dangerous ones and lasers big enough to vaporize them. The last blowout of any consequence had happened almost sixty years before the Kansas Collapse. Lunarians had grown confident of their safety measures. We had grown complacent enough to overcome our innate suspicion of vacuum and the surface, some of us, to the point where the rich now frolicked and tanned in the sunlight beneath domes designed to give the impression they weren't even there. If someone had built a place like Nirvana a hundred years ago there would have been few takers. Back then the rich peopled only the lowest, most secure levels and the poor took their chances with only eight or nine pressure doors between them and the Breathsucker.

But a century of technological improvements, of fail-safe systems that transcended the merely careful and entered the realms of the preposterous, of pyramided knowledge of how to live in a hostile environment . . . a hundred years of this had worked a sea-change on Lunar society. The cities had turned over, like I've heard lakes do periodically, and the bottom had risen to the top. The formerly swank levels of Bedrock were now the slums, and the Vac Rows in the upper levels were now—suitably renovated—the place to be. Anyone who aspired to be somebody had to have a real window on the surface.

There were some exceptions. Old reactionaries like my mother Callie still liked to burrow deep, though she had no horror of the surface. And a significant minority still suffered from that most common Lunar phobia, fear of airlessness. They managed well enough, I suppose. I've read that a lot of people on Old Earth feared high places or flying in aircraft, which must have been a problem in a society that valued the penthouse apartment and quick travel.

Nirvana was not the most exclusive surface resort on Luna, but it wasn't the type hawked in three-day two-night package deals, either. I've never understood the attraction of paying an exorbitant amount for a "natural" view of the surface while basking in the carefully filtered rays

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of the sun. I'd much prefer just about any of the underground disneys. If you wanted a swimming pool, there were any number belowground where the water was just as wet. But some people find simulated earth environments frightening. A surprising number of people just don't like plants, or the insects that hide themselves among the leaves, and have no real use for animals, either. Nirvana catered to these folks, and to the urge to be seen with other people who had enough money to blow in a place like that. It featured gambling, dancing, tanning, and some amazingly childish games organized by the management, all done under the sun or the stars in the awesome beauty of Destination Valley.

And it had damn well better be awesome. The builders had spent a huge amount of money to make it that way.

Destination Valley was a three-kilometer Lunar rift that had been artfully carved into the kind of jagged peaks and sheer cliffs that a valley on "The Moon" *should* have had, if God had employed a more flamboyant set designer, the sort of Lunar feature everybody imagined before the opening of the age of space and the return of the first, dismal pictures of what Luna really looked like. There were no acned rolling hillocks here, no depressing gray-and-white fields of scoria, no boulders with all the edges rubbed off by a billion years of scorching days and bitter cold nights . . . and none of that godawful boring *dust* that covers everything else on Luna. Here the craters had sharp edges lined with jagged teeth. The cliffs soared straight up, *loomed* over you like breaking waves. The boulders were studded with multi-colored volcanic glasses that shattered the raw sunlight into a thousand colors or glowed with warm ruby red or sapphire blue as if lit from within—which some of them were. Strange crystalline growths leaped toward the sky or spread across the ground like sinister deep-sea creatures, quartzes the size of ten-story buildings embedded themselves in the ground as if dropped from a great height, and feathery structures with hairs finer than fiber optics, so fragile they would break in the exhaust from a passing p-suit, clung like sea urchins and glowed in the dark. The horizon was sculpted with equal care into a range to shame the Rockies for sheer rugged beauty . . . until you hiked into them and found they were quite puny, magnified by cunning lighting and tricks of forced perspective.

But the valley floor was a rockhound's dream. It was like walking into a mammoth geode. And it was all the naked geology that, in the end, had proven to be the downfall of Nirvana.

One of the four main pleasure domes had nestled at the foot of a cliff called, in typical breathless Nirvanan prose, The Threshold Of Heavenly Peace. It had been formed of seventeen of the largest, clearest quartz columns ever synthesized, and the whole structure had been rat-nested with niches for spotlights, lasers, and image projectors. During the day it did nice things with the sunlight, but the real show was at night, when light shows ran constantly. The effect had been designed to be soothing, relaxing, suggesting the eternal peace of some unspecified heaven. The

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images that could be seen within were not well-defined. They were almost-seen, just out of sight, elusive, and hypnotic. I'd been at the opening show, and for all my cynicism about the place itself, had to admit that the Threshold was almost worth the price of a ticket.

The detonation in Kansas had nudged an un-mapped fault line a few klicks from Nirvana, resulting in a short, sharp quake that lifted Destination Valley a few centimeters and set it down with a thud. The only real damage done to the place, other than a lot of broken crockery, was that one of the columns had been shaken loose and crashed down on Dome #3, known as the Threshold Dome. The dome was thick, and strong, and transparent, with no ugly geodesic lines to mar the view, having been formed from a large number of hexagonal components bonded together in a process that was discussed endlessly in the ensuing weeks, and which I don't understand at all. It was further strengthened by some sort of molecular field intensifier. It should have been strong enough to withstand the impact of Tower #14, at least long enough to evacuate the dome. And it had, for about five seconds. But some sort of vibration was set up in the dome material, and somehow magnified by the field intensifier, and three of the four-meter hex panels on the side *away* from the cliffs had fractured along the join lines and been blown nearly into orbit by the volume of air trying to get through that hole. Along with the air had gone everything loose, including all the people who weren't holding on to something, and many who were. It must have been a hell of a wind. Some of the bodies were found up on the rim of the valley.

By the time I got there most of the action was long over. A blowout is like that. There's a few minutes when a person exposed to raw vacuum can be saved; after that, it's time for the coroner. Except for a few people trapped in self-sealing rooms who would soon be extricated—and no amount of breathless commentary could make these routine operations sound exciting—the rest of the Collapse story was confined to ogling dead bodies and trying to find an angle.

The bodies definitely were *not* the story. Your average *Nipple* reader enjoys blood and gore, but there is a disgust threshold that might be defined as the yuck factor. Burst eyeballs and swollen tongues are all right, as is any degree of laceration or dismemberment. But the thing about a blow-out death is, the human body has a certain amount of gas in it, in various cavities. A lot of it is in the intestine. What happens when that gas expands explosively and comes rushing out its natural outlet is not something to use as a lead item in your coverage. We *showed* the bodies—you couldn't help that—we just didn't *dwell* on them.

No, the real story here was the same story any time there is a big disaster. Number two: children. Number three: tragic coincidences. And always a big number one: celebrities.

Nirvana didn't cater to children. They didn't forbid them, they just didn't encourage mommy and daddy to bring little junior along, and most of the clientele wouldn't have done so, anyway. I mean, what would that

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say about your relationship with the nanny? Only three children died in the Kansas Collapse—which simply made them that much more poignant in the eyes of the readership. I tracked down the grandparents of one three-year-old and got a genuine reaction shot when they learned the news about the child's death. I needed a stiff drink or two after that one. Some things a reporter does are slimier than others.

Then there's the "if-only" story, with the human angle. "We were planning to spend the week at Nirvana, but we didn't go because blah blah blah." "I just went back to the room to get my thingamabob when the next thing I knew all the alarms were going off and I thought, where's my darling hubby?" The public had an endless appetite for stories like that. Subconsciously, I think *they* think the gods of luck will favor *them* when the trump of doom starts to thump. As for survivor interviews, I find them very boring, but I'm apparently in the minority. At least half of them had this to say: "God was watching over me." Most of those people didn't even *believe* in a god. This is the deity-as-hit-man view of theology. What I always thought was, if God was looking out for *you*, he must have had a real hard-on for all those folks he belted into the etheric like so many rubbery javelins.

Then there were the handful of stories that didn't quite fit any of these categories, what I call heart-warming tragedies. The best to come out of Nirvana was the couple of lovers found two kilometers from the blowout, still holding hands. Given that they'd been blown through the hole in the dome, their bodies weren't in the best shape, but that was okay, and since they'd outdistanced the stream of brown exhaust that no doubt would have seemed to be propelling them on their way, had anyone survived to report on *that* improbable event, they were quite presentable. They were just lying there, two guys with sweet smiles on their faces, at the base of a rock formation the photographer had managed to frame to resemble a church window. Walter paid through the nose to run it on his front feed, just like all the other editors.

The reporter on that story was my old rival Cricket, and it just goes to show you what initiative can accomplish. While the rest of us were standing around the ruins of Dome #3, picking our journalistic noses, Cricket hired a p-suit and followed the recovery crews out into the field, bringing an actual film camera for maximum clarity. She'd bribed a team to delay recovery of the pair until she could fix smiles on the faces and pick up the popped-out eyeballs and close the eyelids. She knew what she wanted in that picture, and what it got her was a nomination for the Pulitzer Prize that year.

But the big story was the dead celebs. Of the one thousand, one hundred and twenty-six dead in Nirvana, five had been Important in one way or another. In ascending order of magnitude, they were a politician from Clavius District, a visiting pop singer from Mercury, a talk-show host and hostess, and Larry Yeager, whose newest picture's release date was moved up three weeks to cash in on all the public mourning. His career had been in decline or he wouldn't have been at Nirvana in the

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first place, but while being seen alive in a place like that was a definite indicator that one's star was imploding, soon to be a black hole—Larry had formerly moved in only the most rarefied orbits—*where* you die is not nearly as important to a posthumous career as *how* you die. Tragically is best. Young is good. Violently, bizarrely, notoriously . . . all these things combined in the Kansas Collapse to boost the market value of the Yeager Estate's copyrights to five times their former market value.

Of course there was the other story. The "how" and the "why." I'm always much more concerned with where, when, and who. Covering the investigations into the Collapse, as always, would be an endless series of boring meetings and hours and hours of testimony about matters I was not technologically equipped to handle anyway. The final verdict would not be in for months or years, at which time the *Nipple* would be interested in "who" once more, as in "who takes the fall for this fuck-up?" In the meantime the *Nipple* could indulge in ceaseless speculation, character assassination, and violence to many reputations, but that wasn't my department. I read this stuff uneasily every day, fearing that Fox's name would somehow come up, but it never did.

I kept a nervous weather eye open for signs of impending depression. I saw some—there's no way you can cover a story like that without feeling grief yourself, and a certain self-loathing from time to time—but I never got really *depressed*, as in goodbye-cruel-world depressed.

I concluded that keeping busy was the best therapy.

What with covering the Collapse from the site and chasing victims' relatives, dome engineers, politicians, and ambulances, I didn't make it into the newsroom for almost ten days after my Change.

It turns the world on its head, Changing. Naturally, it's not the world that has altered, it's your point of view, but subjective reality is in some ways more important than the way things *really* are, or might be; who really knows? Not a thing had been moved in the busy newsroom when I strode into it. All the furniture was just where it had been, and there were no unfamiliar faces at the desks. But all the faces now meant something different. Where a buddy had sat there was now a good-looking guy who seemed to be taking an interest in me. In place of that gorgeous girl in the fashion department, the one I'd intended to proposition someday, when I had the time, now there was only another woman, probably not even as pretty as me. We smiled at each other.

Changing is common, of course, part of everyday life, but it's not such a frequent occurrence as to pass without notice, at least not at my income level and that of most people in the office. So I stood by the water cooler and for about an hour was the center of attention, and I won't pretend I didn't like it. My co-workers came and went, talked for a while, the group constantly changing. What we were doing was establishing a new sexual dynamic. I'd been male all the time I'd worked at the *Nipple*. Everyone knew that the *male* Hildy was strictly a hetero. But what were my preferences when *female*? The question had never come up, and it was

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worth asking, because a lot of people were oriented toward one sex or the other no matter their present gender. So the word spread quickly: Hildy is totally straight. Homo-oriented girls might as well not waste their time. As for hetero-girls . . . sorry, ladies, you missed your big chance, except for those three or four who no doubt would go home and weep all night for what they could no longer have. Well, you like to think that, anyway. I must admit I saw no tears from them there at the cooler.

Within ten minutes the crowd was completely stag, and I was Queen of the May. I turned down a dozen dates, and half that many much more frank proposals. I feel it's best not to leap right into bed with co-workers, not until you have had a chance to know them well enough to judge the possible scrapes and bruises you might get from such an encounter, and the tensions in the workplace that might ensue. I decided to stick with that rule even though I was about to quit my job.

And the thing was, I didn't know these guys. Not well enough, anyway. I'd drunk with them, bullshitted with them, mailed a few of them home from bars, argued with them, even had fights with two of them. I'd seen them with women, knew a bit of how they could be expected to behave. But I didn't really *know* them. I'd never looked at them with female eyes, and that can make one hell of a lot of difference. A guy who seemed an honest, reliable, sensible fellow when he had no sexual designs on you could turn out to be the worst jerk in the world when he was trying to slip his hand under your skirt. You learn a lot about human nature when you Change. I feel sorry for those who don't, or won't.

And speaking of that . . .

I kissed a few of the guys—a sisterly peck on the cheek, nothing more—squared my shoulders, and marched into the elevator to go beard the lion in his den. I had a feeling he was going to be hungry.

Nothing much happens at the *Nipple* without Walter hearing about it. It certainly isn't his great personal insights that bring him the news; none of us are sure exactly how he does it, but the network of security cameras and microphones that lead to his desk can't hurt. Still, he knows things he couldn't have found out that way, and the general opinion is that he has a truly vast cabal of spies, probably well-paid. No one I know has ever admitted to snitching to Walter, and I can't recall anyone ever being caught at it, but trying to find one is a perpetual office pastime. The usual method is to invent some false but plausible bit of employee scandal, tell one person about it, and see if it gets back to Walter. He never bites.

He glanced up from his reading as I entered the office, then looked back down. No surprise, and no comments about my new body, and of course I had expected that. He'd rather die, usually, than give you a compliment, or admit that anything had caught him unprepared. I took a seat, and waited for him to acknowledge me.

I'd given a lot of thought to the problem of Walter and I'd dressed accordingly. Since he was a natural, and from other clues I'd observed over the years of our association, I'd concluded he might be a breast

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fancier. With that in mind, I'd worn a blouse that bared my left one. With it I'd chosen a short skirt and black gloves that reached to the elbows. For the final touch I'd put on a ridiculous little hat with a huge plume that drooped down almost over my left eye and swooshed alarmingly through the air whenever I turned my head, a very nineteen-thirtiesish thing complete with a black net veil for an air of mystery. The whole outfit was black, except for the red hose. It needed black needle-tipped high heels, but that far I was not prepared to go, and everything else I had in the closet looked awful with the hat, so I wore no shoes at all. I liked the effect. From the corner of my eye, I could tell Walter did, too, though he was unlikely to admit it.

My guesses about him had been confirmed at the water cooler by two co-workers who'd recently gone from male to female. Walter was mildly homophobic, not aware of it, had been baffled all his life by the very idea of changing sex, and was extremely uncomfortable to find a male employee showing up for work suddenly transformed into someone he could be sexually interested in. He would be very grouchy today and would stay that way for several months, until he managed to forget entirely that I had ever been male, at which time the approaches would start. My plan was to play up to that, to be as female as a person could be, to keep him on the defensive about it.

Not that I planned to have sex with him. I'd rather bed a Galapagos tortoise. My intention was to quit my job. I'd tried it before, maybe not with the determination I was feeling that day, but I'd tried, and I knew how persuasive he could be.

When he judged he'd kept me waiting a suitable time, he tossed the pages he'd been reading into a hopper, leaned back in his huge chair, and laced his fingers behind his neck.

"Nice hat," he said, confounding me completely.

"Thanks." Damn, I already felt on the defensive. Resigning was going to be harder if he was nice to me.

"Heard you went to the Darling outfit for the body work."

"That's right."

"Heard he's on the way out."

"That's what he's afraid of. But he's been afraid of that for ten years."

He shrugged. There were circles of sweat in the armpits of his rumpled white shirt, and a coffee stain on his blue tie. Once again I wondered where he found sex partners, and concluded he probably paid for them. I'd heard he'd been married for thirty years, but that had been sixty years ago.

"If that's the kind of work he's doing, maybe I heard wrong." He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his desk. I'd just worked out that what he'd said could be a compliment to me as well as Bobbie, which just threw me further off balance. Damn him.

"Reason I called you in here," he said, completely ignoring the fact that it was I who had requested this meeting, "I wanted to let you know you did real good work on that Collapse story. I know I usually don't

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bother to tell my reporters when they've done a good job. Maybe that's a mistake. But you're one of my best." He shrugged again. "Okay. *The* best. Just thought I'd tell you that. There's a bonus in your next paycheck, and I'm giving you a raise."

"Thanks, Walter." You son of a bitch.

"And that Invasion Bicentennial stuff. Really first-rate. It's exactly the sort of stuff I was looking for. And you were wrong about it, too, Hildy. We got a good response from the first article, and the ratings have gone up every week since then."

"Thanks again." I was getting very tired of that word. "But I can't take credit for it. Brenda's been doing most of the work. I take what she's done and do a little punching up, cut a few things here and there."

"I know. And I appreciate it. That girl's gonna be good at hard news one of these days. That's why I paired you two up, so you could give her the benefit of your experience on the feature writing, show her the ropes. She's learning fast, don't you think?"

I had to agree that she was, and he went on about it for another minute or two, picking out items he'd particularly liked in her series. I was wondering when he'd get to the point. Hell, I was wondering when *I'd* get to the point.

So I drew a deep breath and spoke into one of his pauses.

"Walter, frankly . . . what I came in here to do was quit."

"Quit?" He looked at me dubiously, then chuckled. "You'll never quit, Hildy. Oh, maybe in twenty, thirty more years. There's still things you like about this job, no matter how you bitch about it."

"I won't deny that. But the other parts are wearing me down."

"I've heard that before. It's just a bad phase you're going through; you'll bounce back." He smiled blandly.

I sat quietly for some time, staring at him. He just gazed placidly at me. One thought kept coming back to me. It almost seemed as if he'd known when I walked into his office that I'd planned to quit. Otherwise why the stroking, why the sugarplums?

Did he really think I was that good? I *knew* I was good—it was part of my problem, being so proficient at something so frequently vile—but was I *that* good? I'd never seen any signs that Walter thought so.

"Why don't you take a week or so to think this over?" he said at last.

"All right."

"While you're doing *that* . . ." I leaned forward. This was the obvious place to reveal his *real* intentions, now that he'd set the hook firmly.

"All right, Walter, let's see your hole card."

He looked at me innocently, with just a trace of hurt. Worse and worse, I thought. I'd seen that same expression just before he sent me out to cover the assassination of the president of Pluto. Three gees all the way, and the story was essentially over by the time I arrived.

"The Flacks had a press release this morning," he said. "Seems they're going to canonize a new Gigastar tomorrow morning."

I turned it over and over, looking for the catch. I didn't see one.

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"Why me? Why not send the religion editor?"

"Because she'll be happy to pick up all the free material and come right back home and let them write the story for her. You know the Flacks; this thing is going to be *prepared.* I want you there, see if you can get a different angle on it."

"What possible new angle could there be on the Flacks?"

For the first time he showed a little impatience.

"That's what I pay *you* to find. Will you go?"

If this was some sort of Walterian trick, I couldn't see it. I nodded, got up, and started for the door.

"Take Brenda with you."

I turned, thought about protesting, realized it would have been just a reflexive move, and nodded. I turned once more. He waited for the traditional moment every movie fan knows, when I'd just pulled the door open.

"And Hildy." I turned again. "I'd appreciate it if you'd cover yourself up when you come in here. Out of respect for my idiosyncrasies."

This was more like it. I'd begun to think Walter had been kidnapped by mind-eaters from Alpha, and a blander substitute left in his place. I brought up some of the considerable psychic artillery I had marshaled for this little foray, though it was sort of like nuking a flea.

"I'll wear what I please, where I please," I said, coldly. "And if you have a complaint about how I dress, check with my union." I liked the line, but it should have had a gesture to go with it. Something like ripping off my blouse. But everything I thought of would have made me look sillier than him, and then the moment was gone, so I just left.

One of the reasons I can hear Walter call me his best reporter without laughing out loud is that I had no intention of showing up at the canonization the next day to meekly accept a basketful of handouts and watch the show. Finding out who the new Gigastar was going to be would be a bigger scoop than the David Earth story. So I spent the rest of the day dragging Brenda around to see some of my sources. None of them knew anything, though I picked up speculation ranging from the plausible—John Lennon—to the laughable—Larry Yeager. It would be just like the Flacks to cash in on the Nirvana disaster by elevating a star killed in the Collapse, but he'd have to have considerably more dedicated followers than poor Larry. On the other hand, there was a long-standing movement within the church to give the Golden Halo to the Mop-Top from Liverpool. He fulfilled all the Flacks' qualifications for Sainthood: wildly popular when alive, a two-century-plus cult following, killed violently before his time. There had been sightings and cosmic interventions and manifestations, just like with Tori-san and Megan and the others. But I could get no one to either confirm or deny on it, and had to keep digging.

I did so long into the night, waking up people, calling in favors, working Brenda like a draft horse. What had started out as a bright-eyed

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adventure eventually turned her into a yawning cadaverous wraith, still gamely calling, still listening patiently to the increasingly nasty comments as this or that insider who owed me something told me they knew nothing at all.

"If one more person asks me if I know what time it is . . ." she said, and couldn't finish because her jaw was cracking from another yawn. "This is no use, Hildy. The security's too good. I'm tired."

"Why do you think they call it legwork?"

I kept at it until the wee hours, and stopped only because Fox came in and told me Brenda had fallen asleep on the couch in the other room. I'd been prepared to stay awake all night, sustained by coffee and stims, but it was Fox's house, and our relationship was already getting a little rocky, so I packed it in, still no wiser as to who would be called to glory at ten the next morning.

I was bone weary, but I felt better than I had in quite a while.

Brenda had the resilience of true youth. She joined me in the bathroom the next morning looking none the worse for wear. I felt the corners of her eyes jabbing me as she pretended not to be interested in Hildy's Beauty Secrets. I dialed up programs on the various make-up machines and left them there when I was through so she could copy down the numbers when I wasn't looking. I remember thinking her mother should have taught her some of these tricks—Brenda wore little or no cosmetics, seemed to know nothing about them—but I knew nothing about her mother. If the old lady wouldn't let her daughter have a vagina, there was no telling what other restrictions had been in effect in the "Starr" household. I showed Brenda a few tricks she could do to her standard paper jumper that would emphasize her best points—though picking out good points on that endless rail of a body taxed my inspiration and my tact to their limits.

She was coltishly pleased at the attention. I saw her scrutinizing my pale-blue opaque body stocking with the almost subliminal moiré of even lighter blue running through the weave, and had a pretty good idea of what she'd be wearing the next day. I decided I'd drop some subtle hints to discourage it. Brenda in a body stocking would make as much sense, fashion-wise, as a snood on a dry salami.

The Grand Studio of the First Latitudinarian Church of Celebrity Saints is in the studio district, not far from the Blind Pig, convenient to the many members who work in the entertainment industry. The exterior is not much to look at, just a plain warehouse-type door leading off one of the tall, broad corridors of the upper parts of King City zoned for light manufacturing—which is a good description of the movie business, come to think of it. Over the entrance are the well-known initials F.L.C.C.S. framed in the round-cornered rectangle that has symbolized television long after screens ceased to be round-cornered rectangles anywhere but in the Flacks' Grand Studio.

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Inside was much better. Brenda and I entered a long hallway with a roof invisible behind multi-colored spots. Lining the hall were huge holos and shrines of the Four Gigastars, starting with the most recently canonized.

First was Mambazo Nkabinde—"Momby" to all his fans. Born shortly before the Invasion in Swaziland, a nation that history has all but forgotten, emigrated to Luna with his father at age three under some sort of racial quota system in effect at the time. As a young man, invented Sphere Music almost single-handedly. Also known as The Last Of The Christian Scientists, he died at the age of forty-three of a curable melanoma, presumably after much prayer. The Latitudinarian Church was not prejudiced about inducting members of other faiths; he had been canonized fifty years earlier, the last such ceremony until today.

Next we passed the exhibits in praise of Megan Galloway, the leading and probably best proponent of the now-neglected art of "feelies." She had a small but fanatical following one hundred years after her mysterious disappearance—an ending that made her the only one of the Flack Saints whose almost daily "sightings" could actually be founded in fact. The only female out of four non-Changing Gigastars, she was, with Momby, a good example of the pitfalls of enshrining celebrities prematurely. If it weren't for the fact that she provided the only costuming role model for the women of the congregation, she might have been de-throned long ago, as the feelies were no longer being made by anyone. Feelie fans had to be satisfied with tapes at least eighty years old. No one in the Church had contemplated the eclipse of an entire art form when they had elevated her into their pantheon.

I actually paused before the next shrine, the one devoted to Torinaga Nakashima: "Tori-san." He was the only one I felt deserved to be appreciated for his life's work. It was he who had first mastered the body harp, driving the final nails into the coffin he had fashioned for the electric guitar, long the instrument of choice for what used to be known as rocking-roll music. His music still sounds fresh to me today, like Mozart. He had died in Japan during the first of the Three Days of the Invasion, battling the implacable machines or beings or whatever they were that had stalked his native city, unbeatable Godzillas finally arrived at the real Tokyo. Or so the story went. There were those who said he had died at the helm of his private yacht, trying his best to get the hell out of there and catch the last shuttle to Luna, but in this case I prefer the legend.

And last but indisputably first among the saints, Elvis Aron Presley, of Tupelo, Mississippi; Nashville; and Graceland, Memphis, Tennessee, U.S. of A. It was his incredibly still-ascendant star one hundred years after his death that had inspired the retired ad agency executives who were the founding fathers of the Flacks to concoct the most blatant and profitable promotional campaign in the inglorious history of public relations: The F.L.C.C.S.

You could say what you want about the Flacks—and I'd said a lot, in

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private, among friends—but these people knew how to treat the working press. After the Elvis pavilion the crowd was divided into two parts. One was a long, unmoving line, composed of hopeful congregants trying to get a seat in the last row of the balcony, some of them waving credit cards which the ushers tried not to sneer at; it took more than just money to buy your way into *this* shindig. The rest of the crowd, the ones with press passes stuck into the brims of their battered gray fedoras, were steered through a gap in velvet ropes and led to a spread of food and drink that made the usual efforts in this line look like the garbage cans in the alley behind a greasy spoon.

A feeding frenzy among veteran reporters is not a pretty sight. I've been at free feeds where you needed to draw your hand back quickly or risk having a finger bitten off. This one was well-managed, as you'd expect from the Flacks. Each of us was met by a waiter or waitress whose sole job seemed to be to carry our plates and smile, smile, smile. There were people there who would have fasted for three days in anticipation if the Flacks had announced the ceremony ahead of time; I heard some grousing about that. Reporters have to find something to complain about, otherwise they might commit the unpardonable sin of thanking their hosts.

I walked, in considerable awe, past an entire juvenile brontosaur carcass, candied, garnished with glacéd fruit and with an apple in its mouth. They were rolling something unrecognizable away—I was told it had been a Tori-san effigy made entirely from sashimi—and replacing it with a three-meter likeness of Elvis in his Vegas Period, in marzipan. I plucked a sequin from the suit of lights and found it to be very tasty. I never did find out what it was.

I built what might easily qualify as the Sandwich of the Century. Never mind what was in it; I gathered from Brenda's queasy expression as she watched my Flackite wallah carrying it that ordinary mortals—those who did not understand the zen of cold cuts—might find some of my choices dissonant, to say the least. I admit not everyone is able to appreciate the exquisite tang of pickled pig's knuckles rubbing shoulders with rosettes of whipped cream. Brenda herself needed no plate-carrier. She was schlumping along with just a small bowl of black olives and sweet pickles. I hurried, realizing that people were soon going to understand that she was with me. I don't think she even knew what one item in ten *was*, much less if she liked it or not.

The room the Flacks called the Grand Studio had formerly been the largest sound stage at NLF. They had fixed it up so the area we saw was shaped like a wedge, narrowing toward the actual stage in the front of the room. It was quite a large wedge. The walls on either side leaned in slightly as they rose, and were composed entirely of thousands upon thousands of glass-faced television screens, the old kind, rectangular with rounded corners, a shape that was as important to Flackites as the cross was to Christians. The Great Tube symbolized eternal life and, more important, eternal fame. I could see a certain logic in that. Each

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of the screens, ranging in size from thirty centimeters to as much as ten meters across, was displaying a different image as Brenda and I entered, from the lives, loves, films, concerts, funerals, marriages, and for all I knew, bowel movements and circumcisions of the Gigastars. There were simply too many images to take in. In addition, holos floated through the room like enchanted bubbles, each with its smiling image of Momby, Megan, Tori-san, and Elvis.

The Flacks knew who this show was really for; we were escorted to an area at the edge of the stage itself. The actual congregants had to be content with the cheap seats and the television screens. There were balconies upon balconies somewhere back there, vanishing into the suspended-spotlight theme the Flacks favored.

Because we were late most of the seats right up front had been taken. I was about to suggest we split up when I spotted Cricket at a ringside table with an empty chair beside her. I grabbed Brenda with one hand and a spare chair with the other, and pulled both through the noisy crowd. Brenda was embarrassed to make everyone scoot over to make room for her chair; I'd have to speak to her about that. If she couldn't learn to push and shove and shout, she had no business in the news game.

"I love the body, Hildy," Cricket said as I wedged myself in between them. I preened a bit as a large pink pitcher was set in front of me. These Flacks were trained well; I was about to ask for lime wedges when an arm came around me and left a crystal bowl full of them.

"Do I detect a note of wistfulness?" I said.

"You mean because they've retired your jersey from the great game of cocksmanship?" She seemed to consider it. "I guess not."

I pouted, but it was for show. Frankly, the whole idea of having made love to her seemed to me by now an aberration. Not that I wouldn't be interested again when I Changed back to male, in thirty or so years, if she happened to be female still.

"Nice job on that lovers-after-death pic out at Nirvana," I said. I was poking through the assortment of press perks in a basket before me and trying to eat a part of my sandwich with my other hand. I found a gold commemorative medal, inscribed and numbered, that I knew I could get four hundred for at any pawnbroker in the Leystrasse, so long as I got there quick and beat every other reporter in Luna to the punch. A forlorn hope; I saw three of the damn things depart by messenger, and they wouldn't be the first. By now the medals would be a drug on the market. The rest of the stuff was mostly junk.

"That was you?" Brenda said, leaning over to ogle Cricket.

"Cricket, Brenda. Brenda, meet Cricket, who works for some scurrilous rag or other whose initials are S.S. and who deserves an Oscar for the job she is doing covering her deep despair at having had only one opportunity to experience the glory that was me."

"Yeah, it was sort of gory," Cricket said, reaching across me to shake hands. "Nice to meet you." Brenda stammered something.

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"How much did that shot cost you?"

Cricket looked smug. "It was quite reasonable."

"What do you mean?" Brenda asked. "Why did it cost you?"

We both looked at her, then at each other, then back at Brenda.

"You mean that was staged?" she said, horrified. She looked at the olive in her hand, then put it back into the bowl. "I cried when I saw it," she said.

"Oh, stop looking like somebody just shot your puppy, damn it," I said. "Cricket, will you explain the facts of life to her? I would, but I'm clean; *you're* the unethical monster who violated a basic rule of journalism."

"I will if you'll trade places with me. I don't think I want to watch all that go down." She was pointing at my sandwich with a prim expression that was belied by what I could see of the remnants of *her* free lunch, which included the skeletons of three tiny birds, picked clean.

So we switched, and I got down to the serious business of eating and drinking, all the while keeping one ear cocked to the jabbering around me, on the off chance somebody had managed to get a scoop on the canonization. No one had, but I heard dozens of rumors:

"Lennon? Oh, c'mon, he was all washed up, that bullet was a good career move."

". . . wanna know who it's gonna be? Mickey Mouse, put your money on it."

"How they going to handle that? He doesn't even exist."

"So Elvis does? There's a cartoon revival—"

"And if they picked a cartoon, it'd be Baba Yaga."

"Get serious. She's not in the same *universe* as Mickey Mouse . . ."

"—says it's Silvio. There's nobody with one half the rep—"

"But he's got one problem, from the Flacks' point of view: he ain't dead yet. Can't get a real cult going till you're dead."

"C'mon, there's no law says they have to wait, especially these days. He could go on for five hundred more years. What'll they do, keep reaching back to the twentieth, twenty-first century and pick guys nobody remembers?"

"Everybody remembers Tori-san."

"That's different."

"—notice there's three men and only one woman. Granting they might pick somebody still alive, why not Marina?"

"Why not both of 'em? Might even get them back together. What a story. A double canonization. Think of the headlines."

"How about Michael Jackson?"

"Who?"

It kept on and on, a speculative buzz in the background. I heard half a dozen more names proposed, increasingly unlikely to my way of thinking. The only new one I'd heard, the only one I hadn't thought of, was Mickey, and I considered him a real possibility. You could have walked down to the Leystrasse that very day and bought a shirt with his picture on the front, and cartoons were enjoying a revival. There was no law

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saying a cult had to have a real object; what was being worshiped here was an image, not flesh and blood.

Actually, while there were no rules for a Flack canonization, there were guidelines that took on the force of laws. The Flacks did not create celebrities, they had no real axe to grind in this affair. They simply acknowledged pre-existing cult figures, and there were certain qualities a cult figure had to have. Everyone had their own list of these qualities, and weighted them differently. Once more I went through my own list, and considered the three most likely candidates in the light of these requirements.

First, and most obvious, the Gigastar had to have been wildly popular when alive, with a planetary reputation, with fans who literally worshiped him. So forget about anybody before the early twentieth century. That was the time of the birth of mass media. The first cult figures of that magnitude were film stars like Charlie Chaplin. He could be eliminated because he didn't fulfill the second qualification: a cult following reaching down to the present time. His films were still watched and appreciated, but people didn't go crazy over him. The only person from that time who might have been canonized—if a F.L.C.C.S. had existed then—was Valentino. He died young, and was enshrined in that global hall of fame that was still in its infancy when he lived. But he was completely forgotten today.

Mozart? Shakespeare? Forget it. Maybe Ludwig Van B. was the hottest thing on the Prussian pop charts in his day, but they'd never heard of him in Ulan Bator . . . and where were his sides? He never cut any, that's where. The only way of preserving his music was to write it down on paper, a lost art. Maybe Will Shakespeare would have won a carload of Tonys and been flown to the coast to adapt his stuff for the silver screen. He was still very popular—*As You Like It* was playing two shows a day at the King City Center—but he and everyone else from before about 1920 had a fatal flaw, celebrity-wise: nobody knew anything about them. There was no film, no recordings. Celebrity worship is only incidentally about the art itself. You need to do something to qualify, it needn't be good, only evocative . . . but the real thing being sold by the Flacks and their antecedents was image. You needed a real body to rend and tear in the padloids, real scandals to tsk-tsk over, and real blood and real tragedy to weep over.

That was widely held to be the third qualification for sainthood: the early and tragic death. I personally thought it could be dispensed with in some circumstances, but I won't deny its importance. Nobody can *create* a cult. They rise spontaneously, from emotions that are genuine, even if they are managed adroitly.

For my money, the man they should be honoring today was Thomas Edison. Without his two key inventions, sound recording and motion picture film, the whole celebrity business would be bankrupt.

Mickey, John, or Silvio? Each had a drawback. With Mickey, it was that he wasn't real. So who cares? John . . . ? Maybe, but I judged his

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popularity wasn't quite in that stellar realm that would appeal to the Flacks. Silvio? The big one, that he was alive. But rules are made to be broken. He certainly had the star power. There was no more popular man in the Solar System. Any reporter in Luna would sell his mother's soul for one interview.

And then it came to me, and it was so obvious I wondered why I hadn't seen it before, and why no one else had figured it out.

"It's Silvio," I told Cricket. I swear the lady's ear tried to swivel toward me before her head did. That gal really has the nose for news.

"What did you hear?"

"Nothing. I just figured it out."

"So what do you want, I should kiss your feet? *Tell* me, Hildy."

Brenda was leaning over, looking at me like I was the great guru. I smiled at them, thought about making them suffer a little, but that was unworthy. I decided to share my Holmesian deductions with them.

"First interesting fact," I said, "they didn't announce this thing until yesterday. Why?"

"That's easy," Cricket snorted. "Because Momby's elevation was the biggest flop-ola since Napoleon promised to whip some British butt at Waterloo."

"That's part of the reason," I conceded. It had been before my time, but the Flacks were still smarting from that one. They'd conducted a three-month Who-Will-It-Be?-type campaign, and by the time the big day arrived The Supreme Potentate Of All Universes would have been a disappointment, much less Momby, who was a poor choice anyway. This was a bunch whose whole *raison d'être* was publicity, as an art and science. Once burned, twice wear-a-fireproof-suit; they were managing this one the right way, as a big surprise with only a day to think about it. Neither press nor public could get bored in one day.

"But they've kept this one completely secret. From what I'm told, the fact that Momby was going to be elevated was about as secret from *us*, from the press, as Silvio's current hair style. The media simply agreed not to print it until the big day. Now think about the Flacks. Not a close-mouthed bunch, except for the inner circle, the Grand Flacks and so forth. Gossip is their life blood. If twenty people knew who the new Gigastar was, one of them would have blabbed it to one of my sources or one of yours, count on it. If *ten* people knew I'd give you even money I could have found it out. So even less than that know who it's gonna be. With me so far?"

"Keep talking, O silver-tongued one."

"I've got it down to three possibilities. Mickey, John, Silvio. Am I wildly off-base there?"

She didn't say yes or no, but her shrug told me her own list was pretty much like mine.

"Each has a problem. You know what they are."

"Two out of three of them are . . . well, *old*," Brenda put in.

"Lots of reasons for that," I said. "Look at the Four; all born on Earth.

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Trouble is, we're a less violent society than the previous centuries. We don't get enough tragic deaths. Momby's the only superstar who's had the grace to fix himself up with a tragic death in over a hundred years. Most everyone else hangs around until he's a has-been. Look at Eileen Frank."

"Look at Lars O'Malley," Cricket contributed.

From the blank look on Brenda's face, I could see it was like I'd guessed; she'd never heard of either of them.

"Where are they now?" she asked, unconsciously voicing the four words every celebrity fears the most.

"In the elephants' graveyard. In a taproom in Bedrock, probably, maybe on adjacent stools. Both of them used to be as big as Silvio." Brenda looked dubious, like I'd said something was bigger than infinity. She'd learn.

"So what's your great leap of deduction?" Cricket asked.

I waved my hand grandly around the room.

"All this. All these trillions and trillions of television screens. If it's Mickey or John, what's gonna happen, some guy backstage dashes off a quick sketch of them and comes out holding it over his head? No, what happens is every one of these screens starts showing *Steamboat Willie* and *Fantasia* and every other cartoon Mickey was ever in, or . . . what the hell films did John Lennon make?"

"You're the history buff. All I know about him is *Sergeant Pepper*."

"Well, you get the idea."

"Maybe I'm dumb," Cricket said, not as though she believed it.

"You're not. Think about it." She did, and I saw the moment when the light dawned.

"You could be right," she said.

"No 'could be' about it. I've got half a mind to file on it right now. Walter could get out a newsbreaker before they make the big announcement."

"So use my phone; I won't even charge you."

I said nothing to that. If I'd had even one source telling me it was Silvio I'd have called Walter and let him decide. The history of journalism is filled with stories of people who jumped the headline and had to eat it later.

"I guess *I'm* dumb," Brenda said. "I still don't see it."

I didn't comment on her first statement. She *wasn't* dumb, just green, and I hadn't seen it myself until too late. So I explained.

"Somebody has to cue up the tapes to fill all these screens. Dozens of techs, visual artists, and so forth. There's no way they could orchestrate a thing like that and keep it down to a handful of people in the know. Most of my sources are just those kind of people, and they *always* have their hands out. Kind of money I was throwing around last night, if anybody knew, *I'd* know. So Mickey and John are out, *because* they're dead. Silvio has the great advantage of being able to show up here in

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person, so those television screens can show live feeds of what's happening on the stage."

Brenda frowned, thinking it over. I let her, and went back to my sandwich, feeling good for more than just having figured it out. I felt good because I genuinely admired Silvio. Mickey Mouse is good, no question, but the real hero there was Walter Elias Disney and his magic-makers. John Lennon I knew nothing about; his music didn't speak to me. I never saw what the fanatics saw in Elvis, Megan may have been good, but who cared? Momby was of his times; even the Flacks would admit, with a bellyful of liquor, that he had been a mistake for the church. Tori-san deserved to be up there with the real musical geniuses who lived before the Age of Celebrity came along to largely preclude most people's chances of achieving *real* greatness. I mean, how great can you get with people like me going through your garbage looking for a story?

Of all the people alive in the solar system today, Silvio was the only man I admired. I'm a cynic, have been for years. My childhood heroes have long since fallen by the wayside. I'm in the business of discovering warts on people, and I've discovered so many that the very idea of hero-worship is quaint, at best. And it's not as if Silvio doesn't have his warts. I know them as well as every padloid reader in Luna. It's his *art* I really admire, the hell with the personality cult. He began as a mere genius, the writer and performer of music that has often moved me to tears. He grew over the years. Three years ago, when it looked as if he was fading, he suddenly blossomed again with the most stunningly original works of his career. There was no telling where he might still go.

One of his quirks, to my way of thinking, was his recent embracing of the Flack religion. And so what? Mozart wasn't a guy you'd want to bring home to meet the folks. Listen to the music. Look at the art. Forget about the publicity; no matter how much of it you read, you'll never *really* get to know the man. Most of us like to think we know something about famous people. It took me years to get over the fallacy of thinking that because I'd heard somebody speak about his or her life and times and fears on a talk show that I knew what they were really like. You *don't*. And the bad things you think you know are just as fallacious as the good things his publicity agent wants you to know. Behind the monstrous façade of fame each celebrity erects around himself is just a little mouse, not unlike you or me, who has to use the same kind of toilet paper in the morning, and who assumes the identical position.

And with that thought, the lights dimmed, and the show began.

There was a brief musical introduction drawing on themes from the works of Elvis and Tori-san, no hint of a Silvio connection in there. Dancers came out and did a number glorifying the Church. None of the prefatory material lasted too long. The Flacks had learned their lesson from Momby. They would not out-stay their welcome this morning.

It was no more than ten minutes from the raising of the curtain to the appearance of the Grand Flack himself.

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This was a man ordinary enough from the neck down, dressed in a flowing robe. But in place of a head he had a cube with television screens on four sides, each showing a view of a head from the appropriate angle. On top of the cube was a bifurcated antenna known as rabbit ears, for obvious reasons.

The face in the front screen was thin, ascetic, with a neatly trimmed goatee and mustache and a prim mouth on which a smile always looked like a painful event. I'd met him before at this or that function. He didn't appear publicly all that often, and the reason was simply that he, and most of the other Great Flacks, were no better as media personalities than I was. For the church services the F.L.C.C.S. hired professionals, people who knew how to make a sermon stand up and walk around the room. They had no lack of talent for such jobs. The Flacks naturally appealed to hopeful artists who hoped to one day stand beside Elvis. But today was different, and oddly enough, the Grand Flack's very stiffness and lack of camera poise lent gravity to the proceedings.

"Good morning! Fellow worshipers and guests, we welcome you! Today will go down in history! This is the day a mere mortal comes to *glory!* The name will be revealed to you shortly! Join with us now in singing 'Blue Suede Shoes.' "

That's the way Flacks talk, and that's the way I'd been recording it for many years now. They'd given me enough stories, so if they had crazy ideas about how they wanted to be quoted in print, it was all right with me. Flacks believed that language was too cluttered with punctuation, so they'd eliminated the ".", the ",", the " ' ", and the "?", and most especially the ";" and the ":". Nobody ever understood what those last two were for, anyway. They were never very interested in asking questions, only in providing answers. They figured the exclamation point and the quotation mark were all any reasonable person needed for discourse, along with the *underline*, naturally. And they were big on typefaces. A Flack news release read like a love letter to P.T. Barnum.

I abstained from the sing-along; I didn't know the words, anyway, and hymnals weren't provided. The folks in the bleachers made up for my absence. The boogying got pretty intense for a while there. The Grand Flack just stood with his hands folded, smiling happily at his flock. When the number came to an end he moved forward again, and I realized this was it.

"And *now* the moment you've all been *waiting* for!" he said. "The name of the person who from this day forward will live with the *stars!*" The lights were dimming as he spoke. There was a moment of silence, during which I heard an actual collective intake of breath . . . unless that was from the sound system. Then the Grand Flack spoke again.

"I give you *SILVIO*!!!!!"

A single spotlight came on, and there he stood. I had known it, I had been 99 percent sure anyway, but I still felt a thrill in my heart, not only at having been correct, but because this was so *right*. No, I didn't believe in all the Flackite crap. But *he* did, and it was right that he should be

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so honored by the people who believed as he did. I almost had a lump in my throat.

I was on my feet with everyone else. The applause was deafening, and if it was augmented by the speakers hidden in the ceiling, who cared? I liked Silvio enough when I was a man. I hadn't counted on the gut-throbbing impression he'd make on me as a female. He stood there, tall and handsome, accepting the adulation with only a small, ironic wave of his hand, as if he didn't really understand why everyone loved him so much but he was willing to accept it so as not to embarrass us. False, all false, I well knew; Silvio had a titanic ego. If there was anyone in Luna who actually *over*-estimated his genuinely awesome talent, it was Silvio. But who among us can cast a stone unless they have at least as much talent? Not me.

A keyboard was rolled out and left in front of him. This was really exciting. It could mean the opening of a new sound for Silvio. For the last three years he'd been working his magic on the body harp. I leaned forward to hear the first chords, as did everyone in the audience, except one person. As he made his move toward the keys, the right side of his head exploded.

Where were you when . . . ? Every twenty years a story comes along like that, and anyone you ask knows exactly what he was doing when the news came in. Where I was when Silvio was assassinated was ten meters away, close enough that I saw it happen before I heard the shot. Time collapsed for me, and I moved without thinking about it. There was nothing of the reporter in me at that moment, and nothing of the heroine. I'm not a risk-taker, but I was up and out of my seat and vaulting onto the stage before he'd landed, loosely, the ruined head bouncing on the floorboards. I leaned over him and picked him up by the shoulders, and it must have been about then that I was hit, because I *saw* my blood splatter on his face and a big hole appear in his cheek and a sort of *churning* motion in the soft red matter exposed behind the big hole in his skull. You must have seen it. It's probably the most famous bits of holocam footage ever shot. Intercut with the stuff from Cricket's cam, which is how it's usually shown, you can see me react to the sound of the second shot, lift my head and look over my shoulder and search for the gunman, which is what saved me from having my own brains blown out when the third shot arrived. The post-mortem team estimated that shot missed my cheek by a few centimeters. I didn't see it hit, but when I turned back I saw the results. Silvio's face had already been shattered by the fragmented bullet that had passed through me; the third projectile was more than enough to blow the remaining brain tissue through a new hole in his head. It wasn't necessary; the first had done the fatal work.

That's when Cricket took her famous still shot. The spotlight is still on us as I hold Silvio's torso off the ground. His head lolls back, eyes open but glazed, what you can see of them under the film of blood. I've got one bloody hand raised in the air, asking a mute question. I don't

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remember raising the hand; I don't know what the question was, other than the eternal *why?*

The next hour was as confused as such scenes inevitably are. I was jostled to the side by a bunch of bodyguards. Police arrived. Questions were asked. Someone noticed I was bleeding, which was the first time I was aware that I'd been hit. The bullet had punched a clean hole through the upper part of my left arm, nicking the bone. I'd been wondering why the arm wasn't working. I wasn't alarmed by it; I was just wondering. I never *did* feel any pain from the wound. By the time I should have, they had it all fixed up as good as new. People have since tried to convince me to wear a scar there as a memento of that day. I'm sure I could use it to impress a lot of cub reporters in the Blind Pig, but the whole idea disgusts me.

Cricket was immediately off following the assassin story. Nobody knew who he or she was, or how he'd gotten away, and there was a fabulous story for whoever tracked the person down and got the first interview. That didn't interest me, either. I sat there, possibly in shock though the machines said I was not, and Brenda stood beside me though I could see she was itching to get out and cover the story, any part of it.

"Idiot," I told her, with some affection, when I finally noticed her. "You want Walter to fire you? Did somebody get my holocam feed? I don't remember."

"I took it. Walter has it. He's running it right now." She had a copy of the *Nipple* in one hand, glancing at the horrific images. My phone was ringing and I didn't need a Ph.D. in deductive logic to know it was Walter calling, asking what I was doing. I turned it off, which Walter would have made a capital offense if he'd been making the laws.

"Get going. See if you can track down Cricket. Wherever she is, that's where the news will be. Try not to let her leave too many tracks on your back when she runs over you."

"Where are you going, Hildy?"

"I'm going home." And that's just what I did.

I had to turn the phone off at home, too. I had become part of the biggest story of my lifetime, and every reporter in the universe wanted to ask me a probing question: How did you *feel*, Hildy, when you put your hand into the still-warm brains of the only man on Luna you respected? This is known as poetic justice.

For my sins, I soon set the phone to answer to the four or five newspeople I felt were the best, plus the grinning homunculus that passed for an anchor at the *Nipple*, and gave them each a five minute, totally false interview, full of exactly the sort of stuff the public expected. At the end of each I pleaded emotional exhaustion and said I'd grant a more complete interview in a few days. This satisfied no one, of course; from time to time my front door actually rattled with the impact of frustrated reporters hurling their bodies against three-inch pressure-tight steel.

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In truth, I didn't know how I felt. I was numb, in a way, but my mind was also working. I was thinking, and the reporter was coming alive after the horrid shock of actually getting *shot*. I mean, *damn* it! Hadn't that fucking bullet ever heard of the Geneva Conventions? We were non-combatants, we were supposed to *suck* the blood, not produce it. I was angry at that bullet. I guess some part of me had really thought I was immune.

I fixed myself a good meal and thought it over while I did. Not a sandwich. I thought I might be through with sandwiches. I don't cook a lot, but when I do I'm pretty good at it, and it helps me think. When I'd handed the last dish to the washer I sat down and called Walter.

"Get your ass in here, Hildy," he said. "I've got you lined up for interviews from ten minutes ago till the tricentennial."

"No," I said.

"I don't think this is a good connection. I thought you said no."

"It's a perfect connection."

"I could fire you."

"Don't get silly. You want my exclusive interview to run in the *Shit*, where they'll triple the pittance you pay me?" He didn't answer that for a long time, and I had nothing else to say just yet, so we listened to the long silence. I hadn't turned on the picture.

"What are you going to do?" he asked, plaintively.

"Just what you asked me to do. Get the story on the Flacks. You said I was the best there was at it, didn't you?" The quality of the silence changed that time. It was a regretful silence, as in how-could-I-have-said-anything-so-stupid silence. He didn't say he'd told me that just to charm me out of quitting. Another thing he didn't say was how dare I threaten him with selling out to a rival, and he left un-voiced the horrible things he'd try to do to my career if I did such a thing. The phone line was simply buzzing with things he didn't say, and he didn't say them so loudly I'd have been frightened if I really feared for my job. At last he sighed, and *did* say something.

"When do I get the story?"

"When I find it. What I want is Brenda, right now."

"Sure. She's just underfoot here."

"Tell her to come in the back way. She knows where it is, and I don't think five other people in Luna know that."

"Six, counting me."

"I figured. Don't tell anyone else, or I'll never get out of here alive."

"What else?"

"Nothing. I'll handle it all from here." I hung up. I started making calls.

The first one was to one of my shadier contacts. Liz didn't have what I needed, but she knew somebody who knew somebody. She said she'd get back to me. I sat down and made a list of items I would need, made several more calls, and then Brenda was knocking on the back door.

She wanted to know how I was, she wanted my reactions to this and

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that, not as a reporter, but as a concerned friend. I was touched, a little, but I had work to do.

"Hit me," I said.

"Pardon?"

"Hit me. Make a fist and smash it into my face. I need you to break my nose. I tried it a couple times before you got here, and I can't seem to hit hard enough."

She gave me that look that says she's trying to remember all the ways out of this place, and how to get to them without alarming me.

"My problem," I explained, "is I can't risk going in public with this face on me; I need it re-arranged, and in a hurry. So hit me. You know how; you've seen cowboys and gangsters do it in the movies." I stuck my face out and closed my eyes.

"You've . . . you've deadened it, I guess?"

"What kind of nut do I look like? Don't answer, just hit me."

She did, a blow that would have sent a housefly to intensive care if one had been sitting on the tip of my nose.

She had to try four more times, in the end using an old spitball bat I found in my closet, before we got that sickening crunching sound that said we'd done the trick. I shouldn't be too hard on her. Maybe I was acting erratic, there was probably an easier way and she deserved more explanations, but I wasn't in the mood for them. She had a lot worse to come, and I didn't have time.

It bled a lot, as you'd expect. I held my nose pressed in with a finger on the tip, and stuck my face in the autodoc. When it healed, a few minutes later, I had a wide, vaguely African nose with a major hook on the end and a bend toward the left.

Part of getting a story is preparation, part is improvisation, part perspiration and a little bit inspiration. There are small items I carry around constantly in my purse that I may use once in five years, but when I need them, I need them badly. A disguise is something I need every once in a while, never as badly as I did then, but I'd always been prepared for disguising myself on the spur of the moment. It's harder now than it used to be. People are better at seeing through small changes since they're used to having friends re-work their faces to indulge a passing fad. Bushy eyebrows or a wig are no longer enough, if you want to be sure. You need to change the shape of the face.

I got a screwdriver and probed around in my upper jaw, between the cheek and gum, until I found the proper recessed socket. I pushed the tip of the blade through the skin and slotted it in the screw and started turning it. When the blade slipped Brenda peered into my mouth and helped me. As she turned the screwdriver, my cheekbone began to move.

It's a cheap and simple device you can buy at any joke shop and have installed in half an hour. Bobbie had wanted to take it out. He's offended at anything that might be used to mar his work. I'd left it in, and now I was glad as I watched my face being transformed in the mirror. When Brenda was done, my face was much wider and more gaunt, and my

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eyelids had a slight downward slant. With the new nose, my *mother* wouldn't have known me. If I held my lower jaw so I had an overbite, I looked even stranger.

"Let me get that left one again," Brenda said. "You're lopsided."

"Lopsided is good." I tasted blood, but soon had that healed up. Looking at myself, I decided it was enough, and turned the nerve receptors in my face back on. There was a little soreness on the nose, but nothing major.

So I could have gotten some of the same effect by stuffing tissue paper into my cheeks, I guess. If that's all I had, I'd have used it, but did you ever try talking with paper in your mouth? An actor is trained to do it; I'm not. Besides, you're always aware it's there, it's distracting.

Brenda wanted to know what we were going to do, and I thought about what I could safely tell her. It wasn't much, so I sat her down and she looked up at me wide-eyed.

"You got two choices," I told her. "One, you can help me get ready for this caper, and then you can bow out, and no hard feelings. Or you can go along to the end. But I'll tell you going in, you're not going to know much. I think we'll get one hell of a story out of it, but we could get into a lot of trouble."

She thought it over.

"How much can you tell me?"

"Only what I think you need to know at the moment. You'll just have to trust me on the rest."

"Okay."

"You idiot. Never trust anybody who says 'trust me.' Except just this once, of course."

I went to the King City Plaza, one of the better hotels in the neighborhood of the Platz, and checked into the Presidential Suite using Brenda's *Nipple* letter of credit, freshly re-rated to A-Double-Plus. I'd told Walter I might need to buy an interplanetary liner before this job was over, but the fact was since he was paying for it, I just wanted to go first class, and I'd never stayed in the Presidential Suite. I registered us under the names Kathleen Turner and Rosalind Russell, two of the five people who've played the part of Hildegard/Hildebrandt Johnson on the silver screen. The fellow at the front desk must not have been a movie buff; he didn't bat an eye.

The suite came furnished with a staff, including a boy and a girl in the spa, which was large enough for the staging of naval war games. In a better mood I might have asked the boy to stick around; he was a hunk. But I kicked them all out.

I stood in the middle of the room and said "My name is Hildy Johnson, and I declare this to be my legal residence," for the benefit of the hidden mikes and cameras, just in case the tapes were ever brought forward as evidence in a court of law. A hotel guest has the same rights as a person in quarters she owns or rents, but it never hurt to be safe.

I made a few more phone calls, and spent the time waiting for some of

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them to be returned by going from room to room and stripping the sheets and blankets off the many beds. I chose a room with no windows looking out into the Mall, and went around draping sheets over all the mirrors in the room. There were a lot of them. The call I was waiting for came just as I finished. I listened to the instructions, and left the room.

In a park not far from the hotel I walked around for almost half an hour, which didn't surprise me. I assumed I was being checked out. Finally I spotted the man I'd been told to look for, and sat on the other end of a park bench. We didn't look at each other, or talk. He got up and walked away, leaving a sack on the bench between us. I waited a few more minutes, breathed deeply, and picked up the sack. No hand reached out to grab my shoulder. Maybe I didn't have the nerves for this sort of work.

Back in the suite I didn't have long to wait before Brenda knocked on the door, back from her shopping expedition. She'd done well. Everything I'd asked for was in the packages she carried. We got out the costumes of the Electricians Guild and put them on: blue coveralls with Guild patches and equipment belts. Names were stitched into the fabric over the left breast: I was Roz and she was Kathy. Next to the ceremonial wrenches, screwdrivers, and circuit testers dangling from the belt I clipped some of the items I'd just obtained in such a melodramatic fashion. They fit right in. We donned yellow plastic hardhats and picked up black metal lunchboxes and looked at each other in the mirror. We burst out laughing. Brenda seemed to be enjoying the game so far. It was an adventure.

Brenda looked ridiculous, as usual. You'd think a disguise on Brenda would work about as well as a wig on a flagpole. The fact is, she is not that abnormal for her generation. Who knows where this height thing is going to end? Another of many causes of the generation gap was a simple matter of dimension: people of Brenda's age group tended not to frequent the older parts of the city where so many of their elders lived . . . because they kept hitting their heads on things. We built to a smaller scale in those days.

There were no human guards on the workers' entrance to the Flack Grand Studio. I didn't really expect to encounter any at all; according to the information I'd bought they only employed six of them. People tended to rely on machines for that sort of thing, and their trust can be misplaced, as I demonstrated to Brenda with one of the illegal gizmos. I waved it at the door, waited while red lights turned green, and the door sprung open. I'd been told that one of the three machines I had would deal with any security system I'd find in the Studio. I just hoped *my* trust wasn't misplaced, in either the shady characters who sold this sort of stuff or the machines themselves. We *do* trust the little buggers, don't we? I had no idea what the stinking thing was doing, but when it flashed a green light at me I trotted right in, like Pavlov's dog Spotski.

Up three floors, down two corridors, seventh door on the left. And who should be standing there looking frustrated but . . . Cricket.

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"If you touch that doorknob," I said, "Elvis will return and he won't be handing out pink Cadillacs." She jumped just a little. Damn, that girl was good. She was trying to pass herself off as some kind of Flack functionary, carrying a clipboard like an Amazon's shield. The good old clipboard can be the magic key to many places if you know how to use it, and Cricket was born to the con. She looked at us haughtily through dark glasses.

"I beg your pardon," she sniffed. "What are you two doing . . ." she had been flipping officiously through papers on her board, as if searching for our names, which we hadn't given, when she realized it was Brenda way up there under that yellow hardhat. Nothing had prepared her for that, or for the dawning realization of who it was playing Jeff to Brenda's Mutt.

"Goddam," she breathed. "It's *you*, isn't it? Hildy?"

"In the flesh. I'm ashamed of you, Cricket. Balked by a mere door? You've apparently forgotten your girl scout motto."

"All I remember is never let him in the back door on the first date."

"Be prepared, love, be prepared." And I waved one of my magic wands at the door. Naturally, one of the lights remained obstinately red. So I chose another one at random and the machine paid off like a crooked slot machine. We went through the door, and I suddenly realized what her dark glasses were for.

We were in an ordinary corridor with three doors leading off of it. Music was coming from behind one of the doors. According to the map I'd paid a lot of Walter's money for, that was the one. This time I had to use all three machines, and the last one took its time, each red light going out only after a baffling read-out of digits on a numeric display. I guess it was doing something arcane with codes. But the door opened, and I didn't hear any alarms. You wouldn't, of course, but you keep your ears tuned anyway. We went through the door and found ourselves in a small room with the Grand Council of Flacks.

Or with their heads, anyway.

The heads were on a shelf a few meters from us, facing away toward a large screen which was playing *It Happened At The World's Fair*. They were in their boxes—I don't think they could be easily removed—so what we saw were seven television screens displaying the backs of heads. If they were aware of our presence they gave no sign of it. Though how they *could* have given any sign of it continues to elude me. Wires and tubes grew out of the bottom of the shelf, leading to small machines that hummed merrily to themselves.

Brenda was looking very nervous. She started to say something but I put a finger to my lips and put on my mask. She did the same, as Cricket watched us both. These were plastic Halloween-type masks, modified with a voice scrambler, and I'd gotten them mostly to calm Brenda; I didn't expect them to be any use if it came to the crunch, since security cameras in the hallways would surely have taken our pictures by now.

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But she was even less sophisticated in these things than I, and wouldn't have realized that.

Cricket had had her hand in a coat pocket since we'd entered the first corridor. The hand started to come out, and I pointed over her shoulder and said "What the hell is that?" She looked, and I took one of the wrenches off my equipment belt and clanged it down on the crown of her head.

It doesn't work like you see it on television. She went down hard, then lifted herself up onto her hands, shaking her head. A rope of saliva was hanging out of her mouth. I hit her again. Her head started to bleed, and she *still* didn't clock out. The third time I really put some english on it, and sure enough Brenda grabbed my arm and spoiled my aim and the wrench hit her on the side of the head, doing more damage than if she'd left me alone, but it also did the job. Cricket fell down like a sack of wet cement and didn't move.

"What the hell are you doing?" Brenda asked. The scrambler denatured her voice, made her sound like a creepoid from Planet X.

"Brenda, I said *no questions*."

"I didn't plan on *this!*"

"I didn't, either, but if you crap out on me now I swear I'll break both your arms and leave you right beside her." She faced me down, breathing hard, and I began to wonder if I could handle her if it came to it. My record with angry females wasn't sterling, even when I had the weight advantage. At last she slumped, and nodded, and I quickly dropped to one knee and rolled Cricket over and put my face close to hers. I felt her pulse, which seemed okay, peeled back an eyelid, checked the pupils. I didn't know much more first aid than that, but I knew she was in no danger. Help would be here soon, though she wouldn't welcome it. I picked up the goofball that had rolled out of her limp hand and put it in my own pocket. I showed Brenda a photo.

"Look through those cabinets back there, find one of these," I told her.

"What are we—"

"No questions, dammit."

I checked the fourth and most expensive electronic burglar tool I'd purchased, which had been functioning since we entered the Studio. All green lights. This one was busily confounding all the active and passive systems that might be calling for help for the seven dwarfs on the shelf. Don't ask me how; all I know is if one man can think up a lock, another can figure out how to pick it. I'd paid heavily for the security information about the Studio, and so far I'd gotten my money's worth. I went around the shelf and stood between the screen and the Council, saw seven of the infamous Talking Heads that had been a television feature from the very beginning. I chose the Grand Flack, and leaned close to his prim, disapproving features. His first reaction was to use his limited movement to try and see around me. More interested in the movie than in possible danger to himself. I guess if you live in a box you'd have to get fairly fatalistic about such things.

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"I want you to tell me how to remove you from the shelf without doing any harm to you," I said.

"Don't worry about it," he sneered. "Someone will be here to arrest you in a few minutes."

I hoped he was bluffing, had no way of knowing for sure.

"How many minutes can you live without these machines?" He thought it over, made a head movement I interpreted as a shrug.

"Detaching me is easy; simply lift the handle on top of the box. But I'll die in a few minutes." The thought didn't seem to bother him.

"Unless I plug you into one of these." I took the machine Brenda had located and held it up in front of him. He made a sour face.

I don't know what the machine was called. What it did was provide life support for his head, containing things like an artificial heart, lungs, kidneys, and so forth, all quite small since there wasn't that much life to support. I'd been told it would sustain him for eight hours independently, indefinitely when hooked into an autodoc. The device was the same dimensions as his head-box, and about ten centimeters deep. I placed it on the floor and lifted the box by the handle. He looked worried for the first time. A few drops of blood dripped onto the shelf, where I could see a maze of metal pins, plastic tubes, air hoses. There was a similar pattern of fittings on the transport device, arranged so there was only one way you could plug it in. I positioned the box over the life support and pressed down.

"Am I doing it right?" I asked the Grand Flack.

"There's not much you could do wrong," he said. "And you'll never get away with this."

"Try me." I found the right switches, turned off his voice and three of the television screens. The fourth, the one that had been showing his face, was replaced with the movie the group had been watching when we arrived. "Let's get out of here," I said to Brenda.

"What about her? What about Cricket?"

"I said no questions. Let's *move*."

She followed me out into the corridor, through the door where we'd met Cricket, down more hallways. Then we rounded a corner and met a burly man in a brown uniform who crossed his arms and frowned at us.

"Where are you going with that?" he asked.

"Where do you think, Mac?" I asked. "I'm taking it into the shop. You try to run ten thousand of these things, you're gonna get breakdowns."

"Nobody told me nothing about it."

I set the Grand Flack on the floor with the movie side of the screen facing the guard; his eyes strayed to the screen, as I'd hoped. There's something about a moving image on a television screen that simply draws the eyes, especially if you're a Flackite. I had one hand on my trusty wrench, but mostly I flipped through the papers on my clipboard in a bored manner. I came to one page—it seemed to be an insurance policy for Cricket's apartment—and pointed triumphantly to the middle of it.

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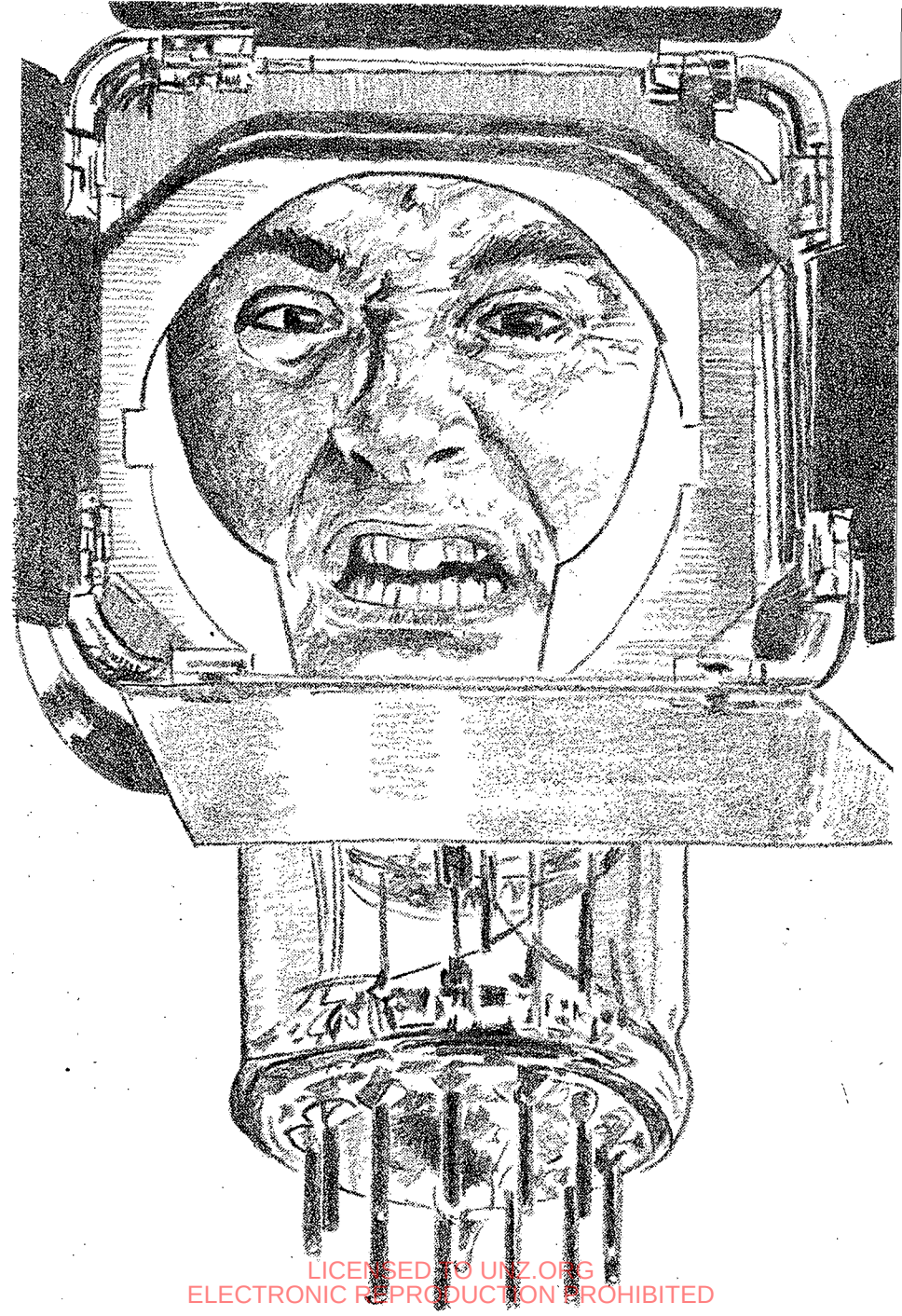

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"Says right here. Remove and repair one model seventeen video monitor, work order number 45293-a/34. Work to be completed by blah blah blah."

"I guess the paperwork didn't get to me yet," he said, one eye still on the screen. Maybe we were coming to his favorite part. All I knew was if he'd asked to see the paperwork I'd have held the clipboard out to him and beaned him with the wrench when he looked at it.

"Ain't that always the way."

"Yeah. I was just surprised to see you two here, what with all the excitement with Silvio gettin' killed and all."

"What the hell," I said, with a shrug, picking up the Grand Flack and tucking him under my arm. "Sometimes you just gotta go that extra kilometer if you want to get a head." And we walked out the door.

Brenda made it almost a hundred meters down the corridor and then she said, "I think I'm going to faint." I steered her to a bench in the middle of the mall and sat her down and put her head between her knees. She was shaking all over and her breathing was unsteady. Her hand was cold as ice.

I held out my own hand, and was pleased to note it was steady. I honestly hadn't been frightened after I detached the Flack from his shelf; I'd figured that if there was any point where my devices might fail, that would be it. But I was aided by something that had helped many a more professional burglar before I ever tried my hand at it. It had simply never been envisioned that anyone would want to *steal* one of the council members. As for the rest . . . well, you can read all these wonderfully devious tales about how spies in the past have stolen military and state secrets with elaborate ruses, with stealth and cunning. Some of it must have been like that, but I'd bet money that a lot of them had been stolen by people with uniforms and clipboards who just went up to somebody and *asked* for them.

"Is it over yet?" Brenda asked, weakly. She looked pale.

"Not yet. Soon. And still no questions."

"I'm going to have a few pretty damn soon, though," she said.

"I'll bet you will."

In order to save time I hadn't had her get any more costumes to stash along our getaway route, so we simply peeled off the Electrician duds and stuffed them into the trash in a public rest room and returned to the Plaza in the nude. I was carrying the Grand Flack in a shopping bag from one of the shops on the Platz and we had our arms around each other like lovers. In the elevator Brenda let go of me like I was poison, and we rode up in silence.

"Can we talk now?" she asked, when I'd closed the door behind us.

"In a minute." I lifted the box out of the bag, along with the few other items I'd saved: the magic wands, the dark glasses, the goofball. I picked up a newspad and turned it on and we watched and read and listened

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for a few minutes, Brenda growing increasingly impatient. There was no mention of a daring break-in at the Grand Studio, no all-points bulletin for Roz and Kathy. I hadn't expected one. The Flacks understood publicity, and while there is some merit in the old saw about not caring what you print about me so long as you spell my name right, you'd much prefer to see the news you *manage* out there in the public view. This story had about a thousand deadly thorns in it if the Flacks chose to exploit it, and I was sure they'd think it over a long time before they reported our crime to the police, if they ever did. Besides, their plates were full with the assassination stories, which would keep their staff busy for months, churning out new angles to feed to the pads.

"Okay," I said to Brenda. "We're safe for a while. What did you want to know?"

"Nothing," she said coldly. "I just wanted to tell you I think you're the most disgusting, rottenest, most horrible . . ." Her imagination failed when it came to finding a noun. She'd have to work on that; I could have suggested a dozen off the top of my head. But not for the reasons she thought.

"Why is that?" I asked.

She was momentarily stunned at the enormity of my lack of remorse.

"What you did to *Cricket!*" she shouted, half rising from her chair. "That was so dirty and underhanded . . . I don't think I want to know you anymore."

"I'm not sure I do, either. But sit down. There's something I want to show you. Two things, actually." The Plaza has some charming antique phones and there was one beside my chair. I picked up the receiver and dialed a number from memory.

"*Straight Shit*," came a pleasant voice. "News desk."

"Tell the editor that one of her reporters is being held against her will in the Grand Studio of the F.L.C.C.S. church."

The voice grew cautious. "And who might that be?"

"How many did you infiltrate this morning? Her name is Cricket. Don't know the last name."

"And who are you, ma'am?"

"A friend of the free press. Better hurry; when I left they were tying her down and cuing up *G.I. Blues*. Her mind could be gone by now." I hung up.

Brenda sputtered, her eyes wide.

"And you think that makes up for what you did to her?"

"No, and she doesn't deserve it, but she'd probably do the same thing for me if the situation was reversed, which it almost was. I know the editor at the *Shit*; she'll have a flying squad of fifty shock troops down there in ten minutes with some ammunition the Flacks will understand, like mock-ups of the next hour's headline if they don't cough up Cricket pronto. The Flacks will want to keep this quiet, but they aren't above trying to get our names out of Cricket, since it looks like a falling out among thieves."

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"And if it wasn't, what was it?"

"It was the golden rule, honey," I said, putting on Cricket's dark glasses and holding up the goofball between thumb and forefinger. "In journalism, that rule reads 'Screw unto others before they screw you.' " I flicked the goofball with my thumb and tossed it between us.

Damn, but those things are bright! It reminded me of the nuke in Kansas, seeming to scorch holes right through the protective lenses. It lasted some fraction of a second, and when I took the glasses off Brenda was slumped over in her chair. She'd be out for twenty minutes to half an hour.

What a world.

I picked up the head of the church and carried him into the room I'd prepared. I set him on a table facing the wall-sized television screen, which was turned off at the moment. I rapped on the top of the box.

"You okay in there?" He didn't answer. I turned a latch and opened the front screen, which was still showing the same movie on both its flat surfaces, inner and outer. The face glared at me.

"Close that door," he said. "It's just ten minutes to the end."

"Sorry," I said, and closed it. Then I took my wrench—I'd developed a certain fondness for that wrench—and rapped it against the glass screen, which shattered. I had a glimpse of a blissfully smiling face as the shards fell, then he was screaming insults. Somewhere I heard a little motor whirring as it pumped air through whatever he used for a larynx. He tried uselessly to twist himself so he could see one of the screens to either side of him, which were also tuned to the same program.

"Oh, were you watching that?" I said. "How clumsy of me." I pulled a cord out of the wall and patched his player into the wall television set, turned the sound down low. He grumped for a while, but in the end he couldn't resist the dancing images behind me. If he'd noticed I was letting him see my face he didn't seem worried about the possible implications. Death didn't seem to be high on his list of fears.

"They're going to punish you for this, you know," he said.

"Who would 'they' be? The police? Or do you have your own private goon squads?"

"The police, of course."

"The police will never hear about this, and you know it."

He just sniffed. He sniffed again when I broke the screens on each side of his head. But when I took the patch cord in my hand he looked worried.

"See you later. If you get hungry, holler." I pulled the cord out of the wall, and the big screen went blank.

I hadn't brought any clothes to change into. I got restless and went down to the lobby and browsed around in some of the shops there, killed a half hour, but my heart wasn't really in it. In spite of all my rationalizations about the Flacks, I kept expecting that tap on the shoulder that asks the musical question, "Do you know a good lawyer?" I picked out some loose harem pants in gold silk and a matching blouse, a lounging

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pajama ensemble I guess you'd call it, mostly because I dislike parading around with no clothes in public, and because Walter was picking up the tab, then I thought of Brenda and got interested. I found a similar pair for her in a green that I thought would do nice things to her eyes. They had to extrude the arms and legs, but the shirt waist was okay, since it was supposed to leave the midriff bare.

When I got back to the suite Brenda was no longer slumped in the chair. I found her in the bathroom, hugging the toilet and crying her eyes out, looking like a jumbo coat hanger somebody had crumpled up and left there. I felt low enough to sit on a sheet of toilet paper and swing my feet, to borrow a phrase from Liz. I'd never used a goofball before, had forgotten how sick they were supposed to make you. If I'd remembered, would I still have used it? I don't know. Probably.

I knelt beside her and put my arm around her shoulders. She quieted down to a few whimpers, didn't try to move away. I got a towel and wiped her mouth, flushed away the stuff she'd brought up. I eased her around until she was sitting against the wall. She wiped her eyes and nose and looked at me with dead eyes. I pulled the pajamas out of the sack and held them up.

"Look what I got you," I said. "Well, actually I used your credit card, but Walter's good for it."

She managed a weak smile and held out her hand and I gave them to her. She tried to show an interest, holding the shirt up to her chest. I think if she'd thanked me I'd have run screaming to the police, begging to be arrested.

"They're nice," she said. "You think it'll look good on me?"

"Trust me," I said. She met my eyes without flinching or giving me one of her apologetic smiles or any other of her arsenal of don't-hit-me-I'm-harmless gestures. Maybe she was growing up a little. What a shame.

"I don't think I will," she said. I put a hand on each of her shoulders and put my face close to hers.

"Good," I said, stood, and held out a hand. She took it and I pulled her up and we went back to the main room of the suite.

She did cheer up a little when she got the clothes on, turning in front of a big mirror to study herself from all angles, which reminded me to look in on my prisoner. I told her to wait there.

He wasn't nearly as bad off as I'd thought he would be, which worried me more than I let him know. I couldn't figure it out until I crouched down to his level and looked into the blank television screen he faced.

"You tricky rascal," I said. Looking at the inert plastic surface of the screen, I could see part of a picture on the screen directly behind his head, the only one I hadn't smashed out. I couldn't tell what the movie was, and considering how little of it he could see he might not have known, either, with the sound off, but it must have been enough to sustain him. I picked him up and turned him around facing away from the wall screen. He made a fascinating centerpiece, sure to start interesting conversations at your next party. Just a head sitting on a thick metal

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base, with four little pillars supporting a flat roof above him. It was like a little temple.

He was looking really worried now. I crouched down and looked at all the covered mirrors and glass. I found no surface that would reflect an image to him if I were to turn on the screen behind him, which I did. I debated about the sound, finally turned it on, figuring it would torment him more to hear it and not be able to see. If I was wrong, I could always try it the other way in an hour or so, if we were granted that much time. Let's face it, if anybody was looking for us, we'd be easy to find. I waved at him and made a face at the string of curses that followed me out of the room.

How to get information out of somebody that doesn't want to talk? That's the question I'd asked myself before I started this escapade. The obvious answer is torture, but even I draw the line at that. But there's torture and then there's torture. If a man had spent most of his life watching passively as endless images marched by right in front of his face, spent every waking hour watching, how would he react if the plug was pulled? I'd find out soon enough. I'd read somewhere that people in sensory deprivation tanks quickly became disoriented, pliable, lost their will to resist. Maybe it would work with the Grand Flack.

Brenda and I spent a silent half hour sitting in chairs not too far from each other that might as well have been on other planets. When she finally spoke, it startled me. I'd forgotten she was there, lost in my own thoughts.

"She was going to use that thing on us," she said.

"Who, Cricket? You saw it fall out of her hand, right? It's called a goofball. Knocks you right out, from what I'm told."

"You were told right. It was awful."

"I'm really sorry, Brenda. It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"It was. I asked for it. I deserved it."

I wasn't sure about that, but it *had* been the quickest way to show her what we'd narrowly averted. That's me: quick and dirty, and explain later. She thought about it a few more minutes.

"Maybe she was just going to use it on the Flacks."

"Sure she was; she didn't expect to find *us* there. But you didn't see her handing out pairs of glasses. We'd have gone down with the Flacks."

"And she'd have left us there."

"Just like we left her."

"Well, like you said, she didn't expect us. We forced her hand."

"Brenda, you're trying to apologize for her, and it's not necessary. She forced my hand, too. You think I *liked* cracking her on the head? Cricket's my friend."

"That's the part I don't understand."

"Look, I don't know what her plan was. Maybe she had drugs on her, too, something to make the Flacks talk right there. That might have been the best way, come to think of it. The penalties for . . . well, I guess for headnapping, it's going to be pretty stiff if they catch me."

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"Me, too."

I showed her the gun I'd bought from Liz; she looked shocked, so I put it away. I don't blame her. *Nasty* little thing, that gun. I can see why they're illegal.

"Just me. If it comes to it, you can say I held that on you the whole time. I won't have trouble convincing a judge I've lost my mind. Anyway, you can be sure Cricket had some plan of attack in mind, and she improvised when we entered the picture. The *story's* the thing, see? Ask her about it when this is all over."

"I don't think she'd talk to me."

"Why not? She won't hold a grudge. She's a pro. Oh, she'll be mad, all right, and she'll do just about anything to us if we get in her way again, but it won't be for revenge. If cooperation will get the story, then she'd rather cooperate, just like me. Trouble was, this story is too big to share. I think we both figured out as soon as we saw each other that one of us wasn't walking out of that room. I was just faster."

She was shaking her head. I'd said all I had to say; she'd either understand it and accept it, or look for another line of work. Then she looked up, remembering something.

"What you said. I can't let you do that. Take the rap, I mean."

I pretended anger, but I was touched again. What a sweet little jerk she was. I hoped she didn't get eaten alive next time she met Cricket.

"You sure as hell *will*. Stop being juvenile. First revenge, then altruism! Those things are for very special occasions, rare circumstances. Not when they get in the way of a story. You want to be altruistic in your private life, go ahead, but not on Walter's time. He'll fire you if he hears about it."

"But it's not right."

"You're even wrong there. I never told you what we were going to do. You couldn't be held responsible. I went to a lot of trouble to set it up that way, and you're an ungrateful brat for thinking of throwing all my work away."

She looked as if she was going to cry again, and I got up and got a drink. Maybe I wiped my eyes, too, standing there in the kitchen tossing down a surprisingly bitter bourbon. You'd think they'd do better at two thousand per night.

When the Grand Flack had had two hours with nothing moving to look at but the flickering lights cast on the other walls by the screen behind his head, I stuck my own head into the room, wondering if I could manage to keep it attached to my shoulders by the time this was all over. He looked at me desperately. His whole face was drenched with sweat.

"This series is one of my *favorites*," he whined.

"So look at the tape later," I said.

"It's not the *same*, dammit! I've already heard the story line."

I thought it was a bit of luck to have one of his favorite soap operas playing just when I needed a lever to pry information out of his head,

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then I thought it over, and realized that whatever was playing at the moment was bound to be his favorite. He watched them all.

"I missed David and Everett's big love scene. *Damn* you."

"Are you ready to answer some questions?"

He started to shake his head—he had a little movement from the neck stump, up and down, back and forth—and it was like a hand took his chin and forced it up and down instead. I guess it was the invisible hand of his addiction.

"Don't run off," I said. "I've got to get another witness." I turned around, and bumped into Brenda, who'd been standing behind me. She wasn't wearing her mask and I thought about getting angry about that, but what the hell. She was in it as an accessory, unless I could make my duress theory stand up in court. Which point I hoped never to reach.

We pulled up chairs on each side of the big screen and turned him around so he could see it. I thought this might take a long time, as his eyes never left the screen, never once looked at us, but he was quite good at watching the show and talking to us at the same time.

"For the record," I said, "have you been harmed in any way since we took you on this little trip?"

"You made me miss David and Everett's—"

"Aside from that."

"No," he said, grudgingly.

"Are you hungry? Thirsty? You need to . . . is there a drain on this thing? A waste dump of some kind? Need to empty the beer cooler?"

"It's not a problem."

So I had him answer a few more questions, name rank and serial number sort of things, just to get him used to responding. I've found it's a good technique, even with somebody who's used to being interviewed. Then I got around to asking the question this had all been about, and he told me pretty much what I'd expected to hear.

"So whose idea was it to assassinate Silvio?" I heard Brenda gasp, but I kept my eyes on the Flack. He pursed his lips angrily, but kept watching the screen. When it looked as if he might not answer I reached for the patch cord and the story came out.

"I don't know who told you about it; we kept security tight, just the inner circle knew what was going to happen. I'd like his name later."

I decided not to tell him just yet that nobody had told me. Maybe if he thought he'd been betrayed he'd pull no punches. I needn't have worried.

"You don't care about whose idea it was, though. You don't care. All you need is someone who'll admit to it. I'm here, so I'm elected to break the story, so let's just say it was me, all right?"

"You're willing to take the blame?" Brenda asked.

"Why not? We all agreed it was the thing to do. We drew lots to select a culprit to stand up for the crime, and somebody else lost, but we can work that out, just so I get time to warn them, get our stories straight."

I looked at Brenda's face to see how she was reacting to this, both the story itself and the blatant engineering of the story between me and the

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man who bought the hit. What I saw made me think there was hope for her in the news business yet. There is a certain concentrated, avid-for-blood look that appears on the faces of reporters on the trail of a *very* big story that you'd have to visit the big cat house at the zoo to see duplicated in its primal state. From the look on Brenda's face, if a tiger was standing between her and this story right now, the cat would soon have a tall-journalist-sized hole in him.

"What you mean is," Brenda went on, "you had someone picked out to go to jail if someone ever uncovered the story." Which meant she still hadn't completely comprehended this man and his church.

"Nothing like that. We knew the truth would come out sooner or later." He looked sour. "We'd hoped for later, of course, so we'd have time to milk it from every possible angle. You've been a real problem, Hildy."

"Thank you," I said.

"After all we've done for you people," he pouted. "First you get in the way of the second bullet. Serves you right, you getting hurt."

"It never hurt. It passed right through me."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Those bullets were carefully planned. Something about penetrating the forehead, the cheek, something like that, spreading out later and blowing out the back of the skull."

"Dum-dums," Brenda said, unexpectedly. She looked at me, shrugged. "When you got hit, I looked it up."

"Whatever," the Flack continued. "The second one spread out when it hit *you*, and did way too much damage to Silvio's face, *plus* getting your blood splattered all over him. You ruined the tableau."

"I thought it was pretty effective, myself."

"Thank Elvis for Cricket. Then, as if you hadn't done enough, here you are *breaking the law*, making me break the story two weeks early. We never thought you'd break the law, at least not to *this* extent."

"So prosecute me."

"Don't be silly. That would look pretty foolish, wouldn't it? All the sympathy would be with you. People would think you'd done a public service."

"That's what I was hoping."

"No way. But there's still time to get the right spin on this thing, and do us both a lot of good. You know us, Hildy. You know we'll work with you to get a story that will maximize your readership interest, if you'll only give us a few things here and there in the way of damage control."

There were a few things going on here that I didn't understand, but I couldn't get to the questions just yet. Frankly, though I've seen a lot of things in my career, done a lot of things, this one was about to make me gag. What I really wanted to do was go out and find a baseball/6 field and play a few innings using this terrifying psychopath as the ball.

But I got myself under control. I've interviewed perverts before, the public always wants to know about perverts. And I asked the next question, the one that, later, you wish you could take back, or never hear the answer to.

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"What I can't figure . . . or maybe I'm dense," I said, slowly. "I haven't found the angle. How did the church expect to look *good* out of all this? *Killing* him, that I understand, in your terms. You can't have a live saint walking around, farting and belching, out of control. Silvio should have seen that. Think how embarrassed the Christians'd be if Jesus came back; they'd have to nail the sucker up again before he upset too many applecarts."

I stopped, because he was smiling, and I didn't like the smile. And for just a moment he let his dreamy eyes drift from the screen and look into my own. I imagined I saw worms crawling around in there.

"Oh, Hildy," he said, more in sorrow than in anger.

"Don't you oh Hildy me, you coffee-table cocksucker. I'll tear you out of that box and shit down your neck. I'll—" Brenda put a hand on mine, and I got myself back under control.

"They'll put you in jail for five hundred years," I said.

"That wouldn't frighten me," he said, still smiling. "But they won't. I'll do time, all right. I figure three, maybe five years."

"For murder? For conspiracy to murder *Silvio?* I want the name of your lawyer."

"They won't be able to prove murder," he said, still smiling. I was *really* getting tired of that smile.

"Why do you say that?"

I felt Brenda's hand on mine again. She had the look of someone trying to break it gently.

"Silvio was in on it, Hildy," she said.

"Of course he was," The Grand Exalted Stinking Baboon's Posterior said. "And Hildy, if I'd been a vindictive man, I could have let you run with the first story. I almost wish I had. Now I'll *never* enjoy David and Everett's . . . well, never mind. I'm telling you as a show of good faith, to prove we can work together again in spite of your back-stabbing crimes. Silvio was the one who suggested this whole thing. He helped interview the shooter. That's the story you'll write this afternoon, and that's the story we always intended to come out in a few weeks' time."

"I don't believe you," I said, believing every word of it.

"That's of little interest to me."

"Why?" I said.

"I presume you mean why did he want to die. He was washed up, Hildy. He hadn't been able to write anything in four years. That was worse than death to Silvio."

"But his best stuff . . ."

"That's when he came to us. I don't know if he was ever a true believer; hell, I don't know if *I'm* a true believer. That's why we call ourselves latitudinarian. If you have different ideas on the divinity of Tori-san, for instance, we don't drive you out of the church, we give you a time slot and let you talk it over with people who agree with you. We don't form sects, like other churches, and we don't torment heretics. There *are* no heretics. We aren't doctrinaire. We have a saying in the church, when

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people want to argue about points of theology: that's close enough for sphere music."

" 'Hum a few bars and I'll see if I can pick it up,' " I said.

"Exactly. We make no secret of the fact that what we most want from parishioners is for them to buy our records. What we give them in return is the chance to rub elbows with celebrities. What surprised the founding Flacks, though, is how many people *really do believe* in the sainthood of celebrities. It even makes some sense, when you think about it. We don't postulate a heaven. It's right here on the ground, if you achieve enough popularity. In the mind of your average star-struck nobody, being a celebrity is a thousand times better than any heaven he can imagine."

I could see he did believe in one thing, even if it wasn't the Return of the King. He believed in the power of public relations. I'd found a point in common with him. I wasn't delighted by this.

"So you'll play it as, he came to you for help, and you helped him."

"For three years we wrote all his music. We attract a lot of artists, as you know. We picked three of the best, and they sat down and started churning out 'Silvio' music. It turned out to be pretty good. You never can tell."

I thought back over the music I had loved so much, the new things I had believed Silvio had been doing. It was still good; I couldn't take that away from the music. But something had gone out of me.

This was a whole new world for Brenda, and she was as rapt as any three-year-old at mommy's knee, listening to Baba Yaga and the Wolves.

"Will that be part of the story?" she asked. "How you've been writing his music for him?"

"It has to be. I was against it at first, but then it was shown to me that everyone benefits this way. My worry was of tarnishing the image of a Gigastar. But if it's boosted right, he becomes a real object of sympathy, his cult gets even stronger. He's still got his old music, which was all his. The church comes out well because we tried everything, and reluctantly gave in to his request to martyr himself—which is his right. We broke some laws along the way, sure, and we expected some punishment, but handled right, even that can generate sympathy. He *asked* us. And don't worry, we've got tons of documentation on this, tapes showing him begging us to go along. I'll have all that wired over to your newsroom as soon as we iron out the deal. Oh, yes, and as if it all wasn't good enough, now the *real* musicians who stood behind Silvio all this time get to come out of the shadows and get their own shot at Gigastardom."

"Shot does seem the perfect word in this context," I said.

The first part of that interview was almost comic, when I think back on it. There I was, thinking I had it all figured out, asking who had planned to kill Silvio. And there he was, thinking I knew the whole story already, thinking I was asking him who had *suggested* to Silvio that, dead, he could become a Flack Gigastar.

Because Silvio had not come up with the idea independently. What he

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had proposed was his own election, live; into the ranks of the Four. It was explained that only dead people could qualify, and one thing led to another. The council was against his plan at first. It was Silvio who figured out the angle to make the church look good. And it was an act of suicide. What the Grand Flack would go to jail for was a series of civil offenses, conspiracies, false advertising, intent to defraud, things like that. What sort of penalty the actual assassin would get, when found, I had no idea.

It scared me, later, that we'd missed understanding each other by such a seemingly trivial point. If he'd known I didn't know the key fact before he admitted what he did, I thought he might have found that little window of opportunity to pay me back for making him miss his soap opera, some way that would have ended with Hildy Johnson in jail and the aims of the church still accomplished. There might have been a way. Of course, there was nothing to really *prevent* him from filing charges anyway, I'd known that going in, but though he might be devious, he'd never take a chance on it backfiring, knowing the kind of power Walter would bring to bear if I ever got charged with something after bringing him a story like that.

Brenda wanted to rush right off and get to work, but I made her sit down and think it out, something that would benefit her later in her career if she remembered to do it.

Step one was to phone in the confession as recorded by her holocam. When that was safely at the *Nipple* newsdesk there was no chance of the Flack going back on his word. We could interview him at our leisure, and plan just how to break this story.

Not that we had a lot of time; there's never much time with something like this. Who knows when someone will come sniffing down the tracks you've left? But we took enough to carry the head back to the *Nipple*, where he was put on a desk and allowed to use his telephone and was soon surrounded by dozens of gawking reporters listening in as Brenda interviewed him.

Yes, Brenda. On the tube ride to the offices I'd had a talk with her.

"This is all going under your byline," I said.

"That's ridiculous," she said. "You did all the work. It was your not accepting the assassination on the face of it that . . . hell, Hildy, it's your story."

"It was just too perfect," I said. "Right when I picked him up, it went through my mind. Only I thought they'd set him up, the poor chump."

"Well, I was buying it. Like everybody else."

"Except Cricket."

"Yeah. There's no question of me taking the credit for it."

"But you will. Because I'm offering it, and it's the kind of story that will make your name forever and you'd be even dumber than you act if you turned it down. And because it *can't* be under my name, because I don't work for the *Nipple* anymore."

"You quit? When? Why didn't Walter tell me?"

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I knew when I had quit, and Walter didn't tell her because he didn't know yet, but why confuse her? She argued with me some more, her passion growing weaker and her gradual acceptance more tinged with guilt. She'd get over the guilt. I hoped she'd get over the fame.

She seemed to be enjoying it well enough at the moment. I stood at the back of the room, rows of empty desks between me and the excited group gathered around the triumphant cub reporter.

And Walter emerged from his high tower. He waddled across the suddenly silent newsroom, walking away from me, not seeing me there in the shadows. No one present could remember the last time he'd come out of his office just for a news story. I saw him hold out his hand to Brenda. He didn't believe it, of course, but he was probably planning to grill me about it later. He was still bestowing his sacred presence on the reporters when I got on his elevator and rode it up to his office.

His desk sat there in a pool of light. I admired the fine grain of the wood, the craftsmanship of the thing. Of all the hugely expensive antiques Walter owned, this was the only one I'd ever coveted. I'd have liked a desk of my own like that some day.

I smoothed out the gray fedora hat in my hand. It had fallen off my head when I jumped onto the stage, into a pool of Silvio's blood. The blood was still caked on it. The thing was supposed to be battered, that was traditional, but this was ridiculous.

It seemed to me the hat had seen enough use. So I left it in the center of Walter's desk, and I walked out.

I had to go home by the back way, and even that had been discovered. One of my friends must have been bribed: there were reporters gathered outside the cave. None had elected to actually enter it, not with the cougar in residence. Though they knew she wouldn't hurt them, that lady is a menacing presence at best.

My re-arranged face almost did the trick. I had made it into the cave and they all must have been wondering who the hell I was and what my business was with Hildy, when someone shouted "It's her!" and the stampede was on. I ran down the corridor with the reporters at my heels, shouting questions, taping my ignominious flight.

Once inside, I viewed the front door camera. Oh, brother. They were shoulder to shoulder, as far as the eye could see, from one side of the corridor to the other. There were vendors selling balloons and hot dogs, and some guy in a clown suit juggling. If I'd ever wondered where the term media circus came from, I wondered no longer.

The police had set up ropes to keep a clear space for fire and emergency crews, and so my neighbors could get through to their homes. As I watched, one neighbor came through, his face set in a scowl that was starting to look permanent. For lack of anything else to do, many of the reporters shouted questions at him, to which he replied with stony silence. I could see I was not going to win any prizes at my next neighborhood block party. This whole thing was bound to get petitions in circulation, politely requesting me to find another residence, if I didn't do something.

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So I spent several hours boxing my possessions, folding up my furniture, sticking stamps on everything and shoving it all in the mail tube. I thought about mailing myself along with it, but I didn't know where I'd go. The things I owned could go into storage; there weren't that many of them. When I was done the already-spare apartment was clean to the bare walls, except for some items I'd set aside, some of which I'd already owned, others ordered and mailed to me. I went to the bathroom and fixed my cheekbones, left the nose alone because I'd let my body designer do that when I could get to him safely. What the hell, it was still under the ninety-day warranty and there was no need to tell him I'd broken it intentionally. Then I went to the front door and let myself appear on the outside monitor. No way was I going to un-dog those latches.

"Free food at the end of the corridor!" I shouted. A couple of heads actually turned, but most remained looking back at me. Everyone shouted questions at once and it took some time for all that to die down and for everyone to realize that, if they didn't shut up, *nobody* got an interview.

"I've said all I'm going to say about the death of Silvio," I told them. There were groans and more shouts, and I waited for that to die down. "I'm not unsympathetic," I continued. "I used to be one of you. Well, *better*, but one of you." That got me some derisive shouts, a few laughs. "I know none of your editors will take no for an answer. So I'll give you a break. In fifteen minutes this door will open, and you're all free to come in. I don't guarantee you an interview, but this idiocy has got to stop. My neighbors are complaining."

I knew that would buy me exactly no sympathy, but the promise of opening the door would keep them solidly in place for a while. I waved to them, and switched off the screen.

I told the door to open up in fifteen minutes, and hurried to the back.

A previous call to the police had cleared the smaller group out of the corridor back there. It was not a public space, so I could do that, and the reporters had to retreat to Texas, from which they could not be chased out, so long as they didn't violate any of the appropriate technology laws by bringing in modern tools or clothing. That was fine with me; I knew the land, and they didn't.

I came out of the cave cautiously. It was full night, with no "moon," a fact I'd checked in my weather schedule. I peered over the edge of the cliff and saw them down there, gathered around a campfire near the river, drinking coffee and toasting marshmallows. I shouldered my pack, settled all my other items so they would make no noise, and scaled the smaller, gentler slope that rose behind the cave. I soon came to stand on top of the hill, and Mexico lay spread out before me in the starlight.

I stared off, walking south, keeping my spirits up by envisioning the scene when the hungry hordes poured through the door to find an empty nest.

I had an unfinished cabin in Texas, one I'd been wanting to get back

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to work on for years anyway. It took about a week for the reporters to track me down there, and then I sat inside for another few days, living on pancakes and chili, refusing to say anything, refusing to come out. Even reporters will give up eventually if there's really no story there. They wanted to interview me, but I wasn't important enough to rate a come-and-go watch, supplying the 'pad with those endlessly fascinating shots of a person walking from his door to his car, and arriving home at night, not answering the questions of the throng of reporters with nothing better to do. So by the beginning of the second week they all went away, gone to haunt someone else. You don't give assignments like that to your top people. I'd known guys who spent all their time staked out on this or that celebrity, and not one of them could pour piss out of a boot.

It felt good to be alone again. I got down to serious work, finishing my un-completed cabin.

Brenda came by a few days later. For a while she said nothing, just stood there and watched me hammering shingles into place.

She looked different. She was dressed well, for one thing, and had done some interesting things with make-up. Now that she had some money, I supposed she had found professional advice. The biggest new thing about her was that she was about fifteen kilos heavier. It had been distributed nicely, around the breasts and hips and thighs. For the first time, she looked like a real woman, only taller.

I took the nails out of my mouth and wiped my forehead with the back of my hand.

"There's a thermos of lemonade by the toolbox," I said. "You can help yourself, if you'll bring me a glass."

"It's talking," she said. "I was told it wouldn't talk, but I had to come see for myself." She had found the thermos and couple of glasses, which she inspected dubiously. They could have used a wash, I admit it.

"I'll talk," I said. "I just won't do interviews."

She climbed up the ladder to join me on the ridge of the roof.

I took the glass of lemonade and she gingerly settled herself beside me. I drained mine and tossed the glass down into the dirt. She was wearing brand new denim pants, very tight to show off her newly styled hips and legs, and a loose blouse that managed to hide the boniness of her shoulders, knotted tight between her breasts, baring her good midriff. The tattoo around her navel seemed out of place, but she was young. I fingered the material of her blouse sleeve. "Nice stuff," I said. "You did something to your hair."

She patted it self-consciously, pleased that I'd noticed.

"I was surprised Walter didn't send you out here," I said. "He'd figure because we worked together, I might open up to you. He'd be wrong, but that's how he'd figure it."

"He did send me," she said. "I mean, he tried. I told him to go to hell."

"Something must be wrong with my ears. I thought you said—"

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"I asked him if he wanted to see the hottest young reporter in Luna working for the *Shit*."

"I'm flabbergasted."

"You taught me everything I know."

I wasn't going to argue with that, but I'll admit I felt something that might have been a glow of pride. Passing the torch, and all that, even if the torch was a pretty shoddy affair, one I'd been glad to be rid of.

"So how's all the notoriety treating you?" I asked her. "Has it cost you your sweet girlish laughter yet?"

"I never know when you're kidding." She'd been gazing into the purple hills, into the distance, like me. Now she turned and faced me, squinting in the merciless sunlight. Her face was already starting to burn. "I didn't come here to talk about me and my career. I didn't even come to thank you for what you did. I was going to, but everybody said don't, they said Hildy doesn't like stuff like that, so I won't. I came because I'm worried about you. Everybody's worried about you."

"Who's everybody?"

"Everybody. All the people in the newsroom. Even Walter, but he'd never admit it. He told me to ask you to come back. I told him to ask you himself. Oh, I'll tell you his offer, if you're interested—"

"—which I'm not."

"—which is what I told him. I won't try to fool you, Hildy. You never got close to the people you worked with, so maybe you don't know how they feel about you. I won't say they love you, but you're respected, a lot. I've talked to a lot of people, and they admire your generosity and the way you play fair with them, within the limits of the job."

"I've stabbed every one of them in the back, one time or another."

"That's not how they feel. You beat them to a lot of stories, no question, but the feeling is it's because you're a good reporter. Oh, sure, everybody knows you cheat at cards—"

"What a thing to say!"

"—but nobody can ever catch you at it, and I think they even admire you for that. For being so good at it."

"Vile calumny, every word of it."

"Whatever. I promised myself I wouldn't stay long, so I'll just say what I came here to say. I don't know just what happened, but I saw that Silvio's death wasn't something you could just shrug off. If you ever want to talk about it, completely off the record, I'm willing to listen. I'm willing to do just about anything." She sighed, and looked away for a moment, then back. "I don't really know if you *have* friends, Hildy. You keep a part of yourself away from everyone. But *I* have friends, and I need them. I think of you as one of my friends. They can help out when things are really bad. So what I wanted to say, if you ever need a friend, any time at all, just call me."

I didn't want this, but what could I do, what could I say? I felt a hot lump in the back of my throat. I tried to speak, but it would get into

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entirely too much if I ever started, into things I don't think she needed or wanted to know.

She patted my knee and started to get down off the roof. I grabbed her hand and pulled her back. I kissed her on the lips. For the first time in many days I smelled a human smell other than my own sweat. She was wearing a scent I had worn the day we kidnapped the Grand Flack.

She would have been happy to go farther but it wasn't my scene and we both knew it, and both knew I'd had nothing in mind other than to thank her for caring enough to come out here. So she climbed down from the roof, started back into town. She turned once, waved and smiled at me.

I worked furiously all afternoon, evening, and into the night, until it grew too dark to see what I was doing.

Cricket came by the next day. I was working on the roof again.

"Git down off'n that there shack, you cayuse!" she shouted. "This here planet ain't big enough fer the both of us!" She was pointing a chrome-plated six-shooter at me. She pulled the trigger, and a stick shot out and a flag unfurled. It said BANG! She rolled it up and put the gun back on her hip as I came down the ladder, grateful for the interruption. It was the hottest part of the day; I'd taken my shirt off and my skin shone as if I'd just stepped out of the shower.

"The hombre back in the bar said this stuff would take the hide off of a rattlesnake," she said, holding up a bottle of brown liquid. "I told him that's what I intended to use it for." I held out my hand. She scowled at it, then took it. She was dressed in full, outrageous "western" regalia, from the white Stetson hat to the high-heeled lizard boots, with many a pearly button and rawhide fringe in between. You expected her to whip out a guitar and start yodeling "Cool Water." She was also sporting a trim blonde mustache.

"I hate the soup strainer," I said, as she poured me a drink.

"So do I," she admitted. "I'm like you; I don't care to mix. But my little daughter bought it for me for my birthday, so I figure I have to wear it for a few weeks to make her happy."

"I didn't know you had a daughter."

"There's a lot you don't know about me. She's at that age when gender identity starts to crop up in their minds. One of her friend's mother just got a Change, and Lisa's telling me she wants to have a daddy for a while. Hell, at least it goes with the duds." She had been digging in a pocket. Now she flipped out a wallet and showed me a picture of a girl of about six, a sweeter, younger version of herself. I tried my hand at a few complimentary phrases, and became aware she was curling her lip at me.

"Oh, shut up, Hildy," she said. "You being 'nice' just reminds me of why you're doing it, you louse."

"Did you have any trouble getting out of the Studio?"

"They roughed me up pretty good. Knocked out my front teeth, broke

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a couple of fingers. But the cavalry arrived and got pictures of the whole thing, and right now they're talking to my lawyers. I guess I got you to thank for that; the timely arrival, I mean."

"No need to thank me."

"Don't worry, I wasn't going to."

"I was surprised it was so easy to get the drop on you."

She brought out two shot glasses and poured some of her rattlesnake-hide remover in each, then looked at me in a funny way.

"So am I. You can probably imagine, I've been thinking it over. I think it was Brenda being there. I must have thought she'd slow you down. Jog your elbow in some way when it came time to do the dirty deed." She handed me a glass, and we both drained them. She made a face; I was a little more used to the stuff, but it never goes down easy. "All subconscious, you understand. But I thought you'd hesitate, since it's so obvious how much she looks up to you. So while I was waiting for that window of vulnerability I made the great mistake of turning my back on you, you son of a bitch."

"Bitch will do."

"I meant what I said. I was thinking of the male Hildy I knew, and *he* would have hesitated."

"That's ridiculous."

"Maybe so. But I think I'm right. Changing is almost always more than just re-arranging the plumbing. Other things change, too. So I was caught in the middle, thinking of you as a man who'd do something stupid in the presence of a little pussy, not as the ruthless ballbreaker you'd become."

"It was never like that with me and Brenda."

"Oh, spare me. Sure, I know you never screwed her. She told me that. But a man's always aware of the *possibility*. As a woman you *know* that. And you use it, if you have any brains, just like I do."

I couldn't say she was definitely wrong. I know that changing sex is, for me, more than just a surface thing. Some attitudes and outlooks change as well. Not a lot, but enough to make a difference in some situations.

"You're sleeping with her, aren't you?" I asked, in some surprise.

"Sure. Why not?" She took another drink and squinted at me, then shook her head. "You're good at a lot of things, Hildy, but not so good at people." I wasn't sure what she meant by that. Not that I disagreed, I just wasn't sure what she was getting at.

"She sent you out here?"

"She helped. I would have come out here anyway, to see if I really wanted to put a few new dents in your skull. I was going to, but what's the point? But she's worried about you. She said having Silvio die in your arms like that hit you pretty hard."

"It did. But she's exaggerating."

"Could be. She's young. But I'll admit, I was surprised to see you quit. You've talked about it ever since I've known you, so I just assumed it

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was nothing but talk. You really going to squat out here for the rest of your life?" She looked sourly around at the blasted land. "What the hell you gonna do, once this slum is finished? Grow stuff? What can you raise out here, anyway?"

"Calluses and blisters, mostly." I showed her my hands. "I'm thinking of entering these in the county fair."

She poured another drink, corked the bottle, and handed it to me. She drained her glass in one gulp.

"Lord help me, I think I'm beginning to like this stuff."

"Are you going to ask me to go back to work?"

"Brenda wanted me to, but I said I don't want to get that mixed up in your karma. I'll go now, back to the glitter and glamor and madcap whirl of my life, leaving you to languish with the lizards, and will add only these words, to wit, Brenda is right, you *do* have friends, and I'm one, though I can't imagine why, and if you need anything, whistle, and maybe I'll come, if I don't have anything else to do."

And she leaned over and kissed me.

They say that if you stay in one place long enough, everybody you ever met will eventually go by that spot. I knew it had to be true when I saw Walter struggling up the trail toward my cabin. I couldn't imagine what could have brought him out to West Texas other than a concatenation of mathematical unlikelihoods of Dickensian proportions. That, or Cricket and Brenda were right: I *did* have friends.

I needn't have worried about that last possibility.

"Hildy, you're a worthless slacker!" he shouted at me from three meters away. And what a sight he was. I don't think he'd ever visited an historically controlled disneyland in his life. One can only imagine, with awe, the titanic struggles it must have taken to convince him that he *could not* wear his office attire into Texas, that his choices were nudity, or period dress. Well, nudity was right out, and I resolved to give thanks to the Great Spirit for not having had to witness that. The sight of Walter in his skin would have put the buzzards off their feed. So out of the rather limited possibilities in his size in the disney tourist costume shop, he had selected a cute little number in your basic Riverboat Gambler style: black pants, coat, hat, and boots, white shirt and string tie, scarlet-and-maroon paisley vest with gold edging and brass watch fob. As I watched, the last button on the vest gave up the fight, popping off and ricocheting off a rock with a sound familiar to watchers of old western movies, and the buttons on his shirt were left to struggle on alone. Lozenges of pale, hairy flesh were visible in the gaps between buttons. His belt buckle was buried beneath a substantial overhang. His face was running with sweat. All in all, better than I would have expected, for Walter.

"Kind of far from the Mississippi, aren't you, tinhorn?" I asked him.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Never mind. You're just the man I wanted to see. Give me a hand unloading these planks, will you? It'd take me all day, alone."

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He gaped at me as I went to the buckboard, which had been sitting there for an hour, filled with fresh, best-quality boards from Pennsylvania, boards I intended to use for the cabin floor, when I got around to it. I clambered up onto the wagon and lifted one end of a plank.

"Well, come on, pick up the other end."

He thought it over, then trudged my way, looking suspiciously at the placid team of mules, giving them a wide berth. He hefted his end, grunting, and we tossed it over the side.

After we'd tossed enough of them to establish a rhythm, he spoke. "I'm a patient man, Hildy."

"Hah."

"Well, I am. What more do you want? I've waited longer than most men in my position would have. You were tired, sure, and you needed a rest . . . though how anybody could think of this as a rest is beyond me."

"You waited for what?"

"For you to come *back,* of course. That's why I'm here. Vacation's over, my friend. Time to come back to the real world."

I set my end of the board down on the pile, wiped my brow with the back of my arm, and just stared at him. He stared back, then looked away, and gestured to the lumber. We picked up another board.

"You could have let me know you were taking a sabbatical," he said. "I'm not complaining, but it would have made things easier. Your checks have kept on going to your bank, of course. I'm not saying you're not entitled, you'd saved up . . . was it six, seven months vacation time?"

"More like seventeen. I've *never* had a vacation, Walter."

"Something always came up. You know how it is. And I know you're entitled to more, but I don't think you'd leave me out on a limb by taking it all at once. I know you, Hildy. You wouldn't do that to me."

"Try me."

"See, what's happened, this big story has come up. You're the only one I'd trust to cover it. What it is—"

I dropped my end of the last board, startling him and making him lose his grip. He danced out of the way as the heavy timber clattered to the floor of the wagon.

"Walter, I really don't want to hear about it."

"Hildy, be reasonable, there's no one else who—"

"This conversation got off on the wrong foot, Walter. Some way, you always manage to do that with me. I guess that's why I didn't come right up to you and say it, and that was a mistake, I see it now, so I'm going to—"

He held up his hand, and once more I fell for it.

"The reason I came," he said, looking down at the ground, then glancing up at me like a guilty child, ". . . well, I wanted to bring you this." He held out my fedora, more battered than ever from being stuffed into his back pocket. I hesitated, then took it from him. He had a sort of half smile on his face, and if there had been one gram of gloating in it I'd have hurled the damn thing right in his face. But there wasn't. What I

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saw was some hope, some worry, and, this being Walter, a certain gruff-but-almost-lovable diffidence. It must have been hard for him, doing this.

What can you do? Throwing it back was out. I can't say I ever really *liked* Walter, but I didn't hate him, and I did respect him as a newsman. I found my hands working unconsciously, putting some shape back into the hat, making the crease in the top, my thumbs feeling the sensuous material. It was a moment of high symbolism, a moment I hadn't wanted.

"It's still got blood on it," I said.

"Couldn't get it all out. You could get a new one, if this has bad memories."

"It doesn't matter one way or the other." I shrugged. "Thanks for going to the trouble, Walter." I tossed the hat on a pile of wood shavings, bent nails, odd lengths of sawed lumber. I crossed my arms.

"I quit," I said.

He looked at me a long time, then nodded, and took a sopping handkerchief from his back pocket and mopped his brow.

"If you don't mind, I won't help you with the rest of this," he said. "I've got to get back to the office."

"Sure. Listen, you could take the wagon back into town. The mule skinner said he'd be back for it before dark, but I'm worried the mules might be getting thirsty, so it would—"

"What's a mule?" he said.

I eventually got him seated on the bare wooden board, reins in hand, a doubtful expression on his choleric face, and watched him get them going down the primitive trail to town. He must have thought he was "driving" the mules; just let him try to turn them from the path to town, I thought. The only reason I'd let him do it in the first place was that the mules knew the way.

That was the end of my visitors. I kept waiting for Fox or my mother to show up, but they didn't. I was glad to have missed my mother, but it hurt a little that Fox stayed away. It's possible to want two things at once. I really *did* want to be left alone . . . but the bastard could have *tried.*

My life settled into a routine. I got up with the sun and worked on my cabin until the heat grew intolerable. Then I'd mosey down into New Austin come siesta time for a few belts of a home brew the barkeep called Sneaky Pete and a few hands of five card stud with Ned Pepper and the other regulars. I had to put on a shirt in the saloon: pure sex discrimination, of the kind that must have made women's lives hell in the 1800s. When working, I wore only dungarees, boots, and a sombrero to keep the worst heat off my head. I was brown as a nut from the waist up. How women wore the clothes the bargirls had on in a West Texas summer is one of the great mysteries of life. But, come to think of it, the men dressed just as heavily. A strange culture, Earth.

As the evening approached I'd return to the cabin and labor until

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sundown. In the evening's light I would prepare my supper. Sometimes one of my friends would join me. I developed a certain reputation for buttermilk biscuits, and for my perpetual pot of beans, into which I'd toss some of the unlikeliest ingredients imaginable. Maybe I would find a new career, if I could interest my fellow Lunarians in the subtleties of Texas chili.

I always stayed awake for about an hour after the last light of day had faded. I have no way of comparing, of course, but it seemed to me the nightly display of starry sky was probably pretty close to the real thing, what I'd see if I were transported to the real Texas, the real Earth, now that all man's pollution was gone. It was glorious. Nothing like a Lunar night, not nearly as many stars, but better in its own way. For one thing, you never see the Lunar night sky without at least one thickness of glass between you and the heavens. You never feel the cooling night breezes. For another, the Lunar sky is too *hard.* The stars glare unmercifully, unblinking, looking down without forgiveness on Man and all his endeavors. In Texas the stars at night do indeed burn big and bright, but they wink at you. They are in on the joke. I loved them for that. Stretched out on my bedroll, listening to the coyotes howling at the moon—and I loved *them* for that, too, I wanted to howl with them . . . I achieved the closest approximation of peace I had ever found, or am likely to find.

I spent something like two months like that. There was no hurry on the cabin. I intended to do it right. Twice I tore down large portions of it when I learned a new method of doing something and was no longer satisfied with my earlier, shoddier work. I think I was afraid of having to think of something else to do when I finished it.

And with good reason. The day came, as it always must, when I could find nothing else to do. There was not a screw to tighten on a single hinge, not a surface to sand smoother, no roof shingle out of place.

Well, I reasoned, there was always furniture to make. That ought to be a lot harder than walls, a floor, and a roof. All I had inside was some cheap burlap curtains and a rude bedstead. I spread my bedroll out on the straw mattress and spent a restless night "indoors" for the first time in many weeks.

The next day I prowled the grounds, forming vague plans for a vegetable garden, a well, and—no kidding—a white picket fence. The fence would be easy. The garden would be a lot harder, an almost impossible project worthy of my mood at the time. As for a well, I'd have to have one for the garden, but somehow the fiction of worthwhile labor broke down when I thought about a well. The reason was that, in Texas, there is no more water under the surface than there is anywhere else on Luna. If you want water and aren't conveniently near the Rio Grande, what you do is dig or drill to a level determined by lottery for each parcel of land, and when you've done that, the disneyland board of directors will have a pipe run out to the bottom of your well and you can pretend you've struck water. At my cabin that depth was fifteen meters. The labor of

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digging that deep didn't daunt me. I knew I was up to it. Hell, I'd developed shoulders and biceps that would have made my body designer go into aesthetic shock. Trading my plane and saw for a pick and shovel would be no problem. That was the part I looked forward to.

What didn't thrill me was the *pretending*. I'd gotten good at it, looking at the stars at night and marveling at the size of the universe. I'd not gone loony; I *knew* they were just little lights I could have held in my hand. But at night, weary, I could forget it. I could forget a *lot* of things. I didn't know if I could forget digging fifteen meters for a dry hole, then seeing the pipe laid and the cool, sweet, life-giving water fill up that dry hole.

I hate to get too metaphorical. Walter always howled when I did. Readers tire of metaphors easily, he's always said. Why the *well*, and not the stars? Why come *this* far and balk, why lose one's imagination right at the end? I don't know, but it probably had to do with the dry hole concept. I just kept thinking my entire life was a big dry hole. All I'd ever accomplished that I was in any way proud of was the cabin . . . and I *hated* the cabin.

That night I couldn't get to sleep. I fought it a long time, then I got up and stumbled through the night with no lantern until I found my hatchet. I chopped the bedstead to kindling and piled it against the wall, and I soaked that kindling with kerosene. I set it alight and walked out the front door, leaving it open to make a draft, and went slowly up the low hill behind my property. There I squatted on my haunches and watched, feeling very little emotion, as the cabin burned to the ground.

I saved the hat. Who knows? Maybe I'd need it again. ●

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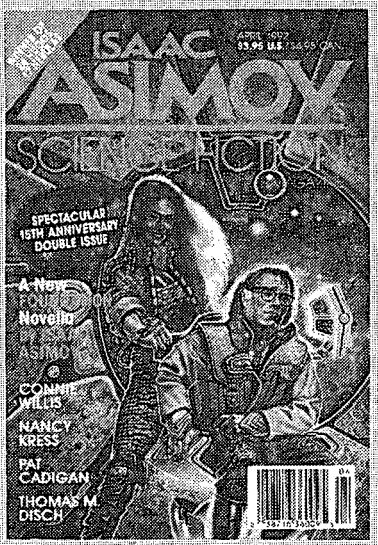

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Fellow Traveler, William Barton & Michael Capobianco, Bantam Spectra, $4.99.

For better and for worse, we certainly find ourselves writing in interesting times. The Cold War, at least at this writing, appears to be over, and the West has won. Communism itself seems to have been cast into the dustbin of history. The Soviet Union seems to have vanished as a major player and a nation-state. The United States appears to have emerged as the unchallenged and unchallengable military overlord of the planet. History itself, according to Francis Fukuyama, has ended with the final triumph of political democracy and economic free market liberalism.

In literary terms, vast shelves of novels, whole sub-genres of imaginative literature—post-nuclear holocaust stories, near-future Cold War techno-thrillers, etc.—would seem to have been rendered irrelevant virtually overnight, indeed (one critic contends in a review of my own *Russian Spring*) "virtually all near-future stories." And he goes on to suggest that "science fiction writers . . . steer clear of the near future until some new world order takes shape and reduces the risks of premature obsolescence."

Well, maybe. For despite George Bush's proclamation of just such a "New World Order," never in our lifetimes has the shape of the near future been as clouded as it is appears to be now.

As Western Europe evolves toward new transnational definitions of "sovereignty," vicious tribal nationalism erupts throughout the vast territory of the former Soviet Union and its former Eastern European empire. Just as democracy and so-called free market economic systems begin to celebrate their final triumph over failed socialist ideological idealism, it becomes all too apparent that the United States, the unchallenged political and military leader of the "Free World," the *impoverished* military overlord of the planet, is itself on the verge of internal economic and perhaps even political collapse.

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As for the Third World, up to its eyeballs in debt to the loan sharks of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, its living standards continuing to decline from an already low level, the less said the better, at least in the eyes of First World triumphalists.

The biosphere itself is menaced by a variety of possible catastrophes—greenhouse warming, ozone depletion, rising carbon dioxide levels—upon which best scientific opinion does not at all agree.

New World Order?

New World *Chaos* is more like it.

Faced by such a whirlwind of imponderables, should science fiction writers steer clear of the near future until some new world order, some consensus reality, evolves to preserve us from the perils of failure as prophets?

In theory, in terms of near-term literary risk-avoidance, perhaps we should.

But can we?

I think not.

Let's suppose we all decide to eschew portrayal of any visions of the next fifty years or so. Let's suppose that starting now, all science fiction is set no less than fifty years in the future. Then what?

How are we supposed to leap over the gap? How do we avoid dealing with the *long term consequences* of the next fifty years of history, or for that matter, the next decade? Will the Earth have a biosphere at all in A.D. 2100? Will the atmosphere be breathable? Will we ourselves have mutated beyond all recognition? Will there be nothing left but a degenerate successor civilization? Some form of world government? An American century? European? Japanese? Like it or not, we are going to have to get through the next fifty years to reach the further future, and the only thing that is certain is that, one way or another, the planet is going to be radically transformed before we do.

Set everything in outer space, in the asteroids, on planets circling other suns? Who are the characters? What is their ethnic identity? What languages do they speak? What political systems do they live under? What forms of economic organization? What happened to the Earth?

No, any science fiction that attempts to take itself seriously, any science fiction that seeks to connect itself to the lives and consciousnesses of its present-day readers, let alone to their posterity, cannot avoid dealing on some level with the consequences of the next fifty years, even if it is set on Pluto in A.D. 3000.

We cannot escape the risk of failure as short or medium term prophets by a literary leap over the uncertainties of the present and the immediate future. Like it or not, the near future *is* going to happen, and *what* happens will inevitably affect what happens next. To pretend otherwise is to *guarantee* a failure of vision, for if we do not try, we certainly cannot succeed.

Furthermore, and a huge furthermore it is, science fiction is not prophecy in the first place; not futurology but literature, and its imaginary worlds, future, alternate, past, metaphoric, exist to serve as settings for stories that touch the human heart.

Ray Bradbury's Mars, let alone

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Burroughs' Barsoom, was "obsolescent" in known scientific terms before the first story in the *Martian Chronicles* cycle was written. Orwell's *1984* is still eminently readable in 1992 and will be in 2084. Kubrick's *2001* transcends the collapse of the American space program. *A Canticle for Leibowitz* would survive the demise of the Catholic Church. The outdated technological fantasies of Verne, the science fiction of Wells, of Mary Shelley, all dead as prediction for long decades, live on as literature.

Why? Because the basic intellectual and literary interest of science fiction is not "what happens next?" but "what if?" and its human corollary, "then what?" "Failed prophecy" or indeed even deliberately false history, as witness "Steampunk," lives on as "alternate worlds."

That much being said, however, it cannot be denied that the sudden chaos of the present, the revolutionary overthrow of so many of our long-held assumptions, the disappearance of the relatively stable political and economic verities that shaped the era of the Cold War, present almost as many problems for science fiction writers seeking a vision of the near future as they do for the hapless political leaders confronting them in the real world.

Fortunately for us, our failures as seers can at worst result in the transformation of prediction into alternate history, whereas *their* tunnel vision threatens, as usual, to lead the world over the fog-shrouded brink of an unknown abyss.

Or, as a TV talk-show host says to American and Soviet presidents in a hopefully obsolescent novella of my own, "When *I* lay a bomb, only my agent dies, but if you bomb out, the whole show gets canceled."

Fortunately for the world, in some small way, science fiction writers, at least, are free to ponder the sudden profuse multiplexity of alternatives without committing the populace of the planet to any of them.

So even in the midst of the current upheavals, science fiction writers have continued to confront the immediate and near future. It should be instructive to have a look at five novels, all copyright in 1991 or 1992, which means they were probably written between say 1988 and 1990—right in the temporal heart of the geopolitical whirlwind. All of them, in one way or another, to one degree or another, attempt to deal with what will emerge out the other side.

The end of the Cold War presents the most obvious literary problem to the would-be author of the espionage, guerrilla-warfare, or paramilitary thriller, the tale of international derring-do; the same problem that confronts various American intelligence agencies in the real world of missions and budgets.

Namely, without the Soviet Union, its minions and/or its dupes as convenient villains, against whom do your heroes and heroines do their derring?

The International Drug Cartel would seem to be one obvious villainous target, and in *The Nemesis Mission,* Dean Ing, like the intelligence community, does indeed nominate the Drug Lords as major international black hats.

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Having been defeated in Colombia and seemingly on the way out in Peru, *chez* Ing, the Medellín Cartel (Pablo Escobar is an offcamera character), sets up a secret operation in southern Mexico, where the jungled mountains provide an ideal terrain for coca cultivation, the writ of the Mexican government runs rather thin, and bribes buy you more cover for the money.

As they have in Peru, the Drug Lords have made an alliance of sorts with Sendero Luminoso, Shining Path, extremist Maoist guerrillas. The Cartel provides the capital and the weapons, the Shining Path guerrillas cultivate and process the coca and defend the territory. The goal of the Cartel is billions as usual, and the goal of the Shining Path is to eventually detach southern Mexico and form a Marxist utopia after their failure in Peru. As in the present Peru, it is strictly a pragmatic alliance, with each party holding the other in contempt.

In order to continue to pay their bribes to the Mexican officials, the Cartel has to smuggle one billion dollars in cash out of the U.S. into Mexico, a formidable task, for even in $100 bills, this is literally tons of money. An involved scheme is put together to do this, involving a chartered airplane and a faked hijacking.

The American intelligence community has a mole inside, gets wind of some of it, and puts together its own scheme to not only thwart the money-smuggling operation, but substitute its own plane and use it to destroy the base camp in the Mexican jungle.

Thus far, a description of the present-tense spy thriller adapted to the plotting exigencies of the New World Order? Maybe. Maybe not.

The technological McGuffin of the novel is the Nemesis of the title, a super-advanced spy plane. It can push Mach 1 but has a stall speed of maybe 30 m.p.h. It has a ceiling well over 50,000 feet. It can remain in the air on station *indefinitely* thanks to its truly ingenious electric engine powered by solar cells. Superplane for sure, puissantly described in loving and convincing detail. Does this make the novel science fiction?

In a note, Ing, an aircraft designer himself, in effect claims not; he's actually built a large-scale working model of the thing.

Be that as it may, Ing makes one big political extrapolation that clearly places the timeframe of the novel in a future that may or may not come to pass, namely that the Peruvian government of Alberto Fujimori, far from being overthrown by Sendero Luminoso in the near future, will defeat the guerrillas to the point where they and their Cartel allies will be forced to move their operations to Mexico.

Me, I don't believe it. At this writing, Shining Path controls 60 percent of Peru, has encircled Lima, protects the coca industry which is the backbone of what remains of the bankrupt economy, has already established alternate quasi-governmental operations inside the capital, has the support of the Quechua-speaking Indians who are the majority of the population, and seems to be waiting only for the American presidential elec-

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tion to pass before taking over.

That's my prediction. *The Nemesis Mission* is Dean Ing's. We're both out on different limbs. That's the risk of near-future science fiction. But that's the fun of it too, for my disbelief in his political premise doesn't prevent me from enjoying what is one hell of a story.

Though *The Nemesis Mission* is structured like an espionage thriller, it is rather emotionally nonpolitical, the plot serving not as a soapbox for a screed against the Drug Lords, but as the set-up for an unusual hybrid of the action-adventure novel, the hardware novel, and the novel of character. At its heart, it is a novel about pilots, airplanes, and flying, and it's hard to think of anyone who has done it better than Ing does here.

There are many viewpoint characters, including FBI and CIA operatives, an aircraft designer, a bizarre Mormon archaeological soldier of fortune, a Shining Path guerrilla, all of them, without exception, rendered not only believable, but sympathetic on some human level no matter what side they are on.

So too, amazingly enough, Simon Torres, one of the main characters, a Drug Lord, yes, functionally a main villain, for sure, but, like Wes Hardin and Colleen Morrison, working for the other side, a pilot.

Ing not only knows airplanes and pilots inside out, he obviously loves them. Not only does he render the hardware beautifully without ever really descending into technophilic wanking, he captures the emotional, esthetic, and spiritual dimensions of it all too.

That's ultimately why Torres is sympathetic. Okay, he's a Colombian Drug Lord and all, but he *is* also a pilot, possessed of the passion, the esthetics, the spirit, of same. As such, he has an inner life, a kind of honor even. This is what saves the inevitable climactic dogfight between Torres and Hardin from being merely a shoot-out between the good guy and the bad guy at the OK Corral in the sky, for in the slam-bang action of it all, they begin to relate to each other as pilots, and it ends not so much with a bang as with genuine pathos.

Dean Ing has been around for a long time, but with *The Nemesis Mission,* and his previous novel, *The Ransom of Black Stealth One,* he emerges as a fully-rounded novelist. Technologically knowledgeable, humanly knowing, and in places quite funny, Ing has evolved into a major talent in a sub-genre he just may be in the process of inventing.

While Ing solves the literary problem of the sudden dearth of credible geopolitical villains by nominating the Drug Lords for the vacant position even as the American military and industrial establishment seems to be doing, Mike McQuay in *Puppet Master,* like his villain, super-lobbyist Ben James, faces the real political and economic problem head-on, and the horrifyingly realistic solution is all too chillingly plausible.

The real problem?

In McQuay's all-too-real world of Washington's budgetary social Darwinism, the real problem for the military industrial complex and its point-man with Congress,

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Ben James, is how to keep military spending on an acceptable level in the absence of the Soviet threat or a plausible successor.

Congress is preparing to vote a big cut in the defense budget, and it is James' commission to defeat the legislation. How? In the absence of a credible threat to the military overlord of the planet, it is pragmatically necessary to *create* one, or at least the illusion of same.

Nominate, say . . . Carribea, a mythical Central American state whose internal situation is modeled on that of post-Sandinista Nicaragua, with an elected pro-American government rendered shaky by a crumbling economy, a military still more or less in the hands of the previous Marxist administration, and extremist Contra-type remnants running around the jungle borders.

Steal a couple of American nukes, secrete them in the jungle, create a few incidents sufficient to draw a few thousand American troops onto one side of the Carribea border and Cubans onto the other, time it to the climactic vote, and then set them off when they will do the most budgetary good for your clients. . . .

James is a monster, preserved from seeming like a straw man villain only because McQuay succeeds in portraying him as a chillingly charming monster, just the sort of good ol' reptile one might actually encounter working the hallways of Congress. His heroic nemesis, Charlie Merchant, is a bit of a cartoon figure too, humanized by his priggishness, his political naïvete, his crumbling relationship with his wife.

The rest though, is all too realistically plausible. McQuay seamlessly portrays his fictional Washington snake-pit as arising directly from the real inner history of the 1980's—to the point that it's hard to say where the history ends and the fiction begins.

Mike McQuay, like Dean Ing, has been around for quite a while, and like the Ing, albeit in a quite different mode, *Puppet Master* marks the emergence of a mature talent. This is a politically knowledgeable and sophisticated novel, a politically committed novel informed by more naked passion than McQuay has ever revealed before. It is a politically angry book too, preserved from a descent into shrill polemic by McQuay's careful and measured control, formidable political verisimilitude, sense of irony, and rather well-rounded characters.

Near-future science fiction?

One certainly hopes so.

Ben James may be a larger (or lower) than life super-villain, but on another level, he is a symbolic personification of the system —amoral, octopuslike, committed to nothing but the economic bottom line.

He is portrayed to a certain extent as a mutant aberration. The military industrial complex *really* wouldn't go so far as to nuke American troops to preserve their fat slice of the budgetary pie. . . .

Then again, in the real world, with American "advisers" oozing into Peru, and the DEA doing quasi-combat missions against drug operations in several Latin American countries, and the media beginning to beat the drums for the

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termination of the Quaddafi regime in Libya and the Castro regime in Cuba, maybe they won't have to. . . .

Taken together, in different ways, *The Nemesis Mission* and *Puppet Master* point toward what is likely to become a trend in both near-future American geopolitics and near-future science fiction grounded in same.

Ing is not the first to substitute the Colombian Drug Lords for the Soviet Union in order to rescue the espionage thriller from lack of major-league international villainy, and he won't be the last, though he may be the first to factor in the Shining Path guerrillas. And I'm willing to risk predicting that, as the situation in Peru, and perhaps later in Ecuador and Bolivia, develops, we'll be reading a lot more about the Shining Path in the pages of such fiction, and probably in screaming newspaper headlines.

And McQuay tells us why in no uncertain terms. The West may have won the Cold War, the Soviet Union may have evaporated as the Evil Empire, but fear not, it can still be a dangerous world out there if you know where to look, and given a quarter of a trillion dollar budget to defend, the beneficiaries thereof, like novelists, are already sending out their casting calls for the black hats of the future.

In light of which, it is interesting to observe that, at the very moment in history when American politicians are crowing over the triumph of the American Way and free market economics, when Marxism has collapsed of its own internal contradictions, American dystopias like Mike McQuay's are much more readily to be found in the pages of near-future science fiction than utopian visions of the coming American Century, of George Bush's nebulous New World Order, which seem to be more or less non-existent.

Perhaps this is merely a literary phenomenon. Perhaps, in the absence of credible villainy on a geopolitical scale, motivated by the need for plot-conflict, writers seeking to set their stories in the near future can only look inward. In the absence of external Nemesis, when we seek for an enemy, it can only be us.

Then again, maybe not. For while the near future of world politics may be clouded by the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of Soviet power as an antagonist to American military and political hegemony, the near future of the United States has already begun to emerge from the smoke and mirrors of the 1980s.

The *annual* American Federal deficit is triple the total *accumulated* overseas debt of Brazil, the Third World's champion deadbeat. The annual *interest* on the national debt is approaching four hundred billion dollars, more than is spent on defense, space, and welfare combined, it is growing at a rate of forty billion dollars a year, and the *rate* of growth is growing too.

The United States is not only more thoroughly bankrupt than any other nation in the world, but more bankrupt than it would be possible for any other nation to become, for no other nation has the military power and economic clout to preserve itself from the international political consequences of

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such awesome profligacy. Were this the turn of the century and the United States any other country, Teddy Roosevelt's bill-collecting gunboats would already be sailing up the Potomac.

But it isn't, we're not, and they wouldn't dare. Dead broke on a governmental level, its banking system about as sound as a Confederate three dollar bill, the fiscal health of its vaunted free market industrial structure gutted by a mountain of junk bonds and poison-pill defenses against leveraged buyouts, the standard of living of its citizens in decline for about twenty years, the United States is still the military overlord of the planet. Wanna make something of it, bozo?

And while only a handful of science fiction stories have begun to contemplate the frightening implications of such an unprecedented and horrendous paradox for the world as a whole, we SF writers, collectively, can lay claim to having been well ahead of the curve when it comes to the domestic consequences, economic, political, cultural, and moral.

It's all more or less there in words of one syllable in *Puppet Master*, it's been foreshadowed in much of the Cyberpunk canon, in Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Gold Coast*, in my own *Little Heroes*, and much, much more. We may not have been so prescient in foreseeing the collapse and disappearance of Ronald Reagan's Evil Empire, but collectively we haven't done so badly in foreseeing the new Evil Empire he did so much to create. By now, the economic, cultural, and moral decline of America has become a near-future given; even the newspapers have finally caught up with science fiction. When it comes to George Bush's nebulous vision of the coming glories of the new American century, the Cheese stands alone.

In Charles Oberndorf's *Sheltered Lives,* the vision has been so thoroughly assimilated that it fades into the background of a kind of bitter non-love story. At one point, the galleys identify the timeframe as the twenty-fourth century, but surely this must be a typo, for the Festung America depicted therein seems much, much closer to temporal home.

AIDS has mutated into a whole series of fatal sexually transmitted diseases collectively known as "Hives." Most of the middle and upper classes are now forted-up in "Constructs," clean, antiseptic, residential mall-worlds, not unlike the Todos Santos of Niven and Pournelle's *Oath of Fealty,* but with one telling and central difference that epitomizes the metaphorical title.

As in my own *Agent of Chaos*, TV spy cameras with government monitors at the other end are everywhere. In *Agent of Chaos,* these are the imposed instrumentalities of a pretty standard tyranny. In Oberndorf's America, though, people *choose* to live their "Sheltered Lives" under the watchful eyes of government monitors. The majority see it as a government service, the final solution to the crime problem, not a violation of their liberty.

So too does the general populace view the quarantining of those infected with Hives in straightforward concentration camps as a

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necessary protective measure taken by the state to shelter the lives of its citizens from infection.

The first person narrator, Rod Lawrence, is a "hired companion." The government which quarantines Hivers as a protective measure is realistic about the reality of the sexual needs of its citizenry. In a situation where random sexual encounters are a form of Russian roulette, it provides them with sheltered sex lives too.

The operatives of Direct Services are straightforward emotionally uninvolved prostitutes, tested regularly for the absence of Hives, as are their clients prior to the act. The same procedures apply to commerce with the employees of Personal Services like Rod, but "hired companions" are more than whores, they combine expert sexual servicing with equally expert psychological ministrations of a kind. One can hire them by the hour, by the day, by exclusive term contract, by open-ended exclusive contract, and they serve as surrogate lovers in a pseudo-relationship, the parameters of which are tailored to the psychic, as well as sexual, needs of the clients.

If Rod is not quite an idealist, he considers his profession an honorable and socially useful one. He is hired by Anna Baxter, whose lover has just committed suicide.

Anna is the daughter of James Baxter, the construction magnate whose father originated the Construct concept and who himself built the Hiver concentration camps. Anna and her dead lover were involved with Americans for Social Democracy, a non-violent political movement opposed to the quarantine camps, and they may have been involved with its violent successor, the Union for Human Liberation. Ed Lang, friend of the family and high-level Monitoring operative, pressures Rod into serving, more or less, as his agent, with the commission to trace Anna's connections, or lack of same, to the UHL.

That's the basic set-up, and the plotline involves various dips and turns, secret meetings, double-crosses, UHL operatives, internal government spooks, and so forth. But the plot is not really what *Sheltered Lives* is centrally about, nor, really, the politics of Oberndorf's well-realized future America.

What the novel is centrally about is not so much Oberndorf's Festung America but the emotional fortress mentalities of the sheltered lives lived within this entirely Constitutional and superficially benign Friendly Fascism.

I called *Sheltered Lives* a non-love story, and that's what it is. Rod and Anna progress from a professional relationship to a kind of tentative series of attempts at a genuine love affair, but they never seem able to quite make it. Why?

Oberndorf never quite makes it plain, but that is by no means a failure on his part. Far from it. *Sheltered Lives* is a most subtle novel of character, with a political novel embedded so deep within it as to be rendered all-but-invisible, and the elusive thematic center of it all seems to emerge from the gaps.

There are no real villains; Lang, James Baxter, the UDL terrorists, the government itself, all seem to

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be idealistically motivated by their own lights. Lang sees himself as a disciple of Thomas Jefferson, Baxter sees himself as acting for the public good, the UDL, like the IRA, see themselves as soldiers of liberty, and the government sees itself as carrying out the will of the people.

All of them are right, yet on some subtle level, everything is wrong. Love, perhaps, simply cannot exist in this environment. By sheltering the lives of its citizens from the real dangers of unmonitored and uncontrolled intimacy, this subtly fallen America ends up sheltering them from each other, condemning them to a solipsistic isolation inside their own heads. By attempting too assiduously to guard them from the potential for true human tragedy, the society ends up denying them the psychological potential for its elusive reverse.

In *China Mountain Zhang,* Maureen F. McHugh also presents, among many other things, a vision of fallen future America, albeit of a unique and radically unexpected sort.

All the premature Western funerary orations over the corpse of Communism neglect one important geopolitical reality, quite literally the biggest geopolitical fact in the world.

Namely, that something like a billion and a quarter people, close to a quarter of the world's population, still presently live under Communist rule, more people than live in all the so-called free market liberal democracies combined.

A Communist state that has succeeded in banishing millennial famine, provides a livable diet, acceptable medical care, and fairly decent education for that enormous population, a Communist state whose gross national product and overall living standards, far from sinking into the abyss, are on the rise.

True, too true, this modest economic success story is marred by wretched political repression and fairly ruthless trampling of human rights; a land, in which, reversing the Soviet experience, economic perestroika is somewhat fitfully succeeding, and political glasnost has presently failed.

I'm talking, of course, about the People's Republic of China. Last time I looked it was still there, and showing no signs of going away.

It's remarkable how we all seem to ignore the self-styled Middle Kingdom when we peer into the planetary future. It takes a novel like *China Mountain Zhang* to suddenly remind us just how huge this ethnocentric blind spot really is.

The future of this novel belongs to the Chinese. Why not? A quarter of the world's population. A culture that has endured for over three thousand years. A collectivist system in sync with its primal communal weltanschauung on the one hand, and an ancient tradition of entrepreneurship on the other. While the West languished in its Dark Age, Chinese science and technology led the world.

Why not again?

Utopia, McHugh's future is not, not for the Chinese, whose world-dominant culture and technology remains somewhat politically and psychically authoritarian, as it has for the last few thousand years,

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still less for a Sinofied America living in its shadow, less still for the Zhang of the title, an American Sino-Latino New Yorker, and a homosexual in an unabashedly homophobic hand-me-down Chinese culture.

The novel is set primarily in New York, with long sections in a Greenland outpost, colonial Mars, and in the Middle Kingdom as well. McHugh has lived and taught in China, and it really shows, in the immensely detailed vision of this future dominant Chinese culture, in the subtly-rendered depiction of the interplay of linguistic structure, culture, and individual psychology, in the sheer believability of it all.

China is still Marxist, nor has it exactly become an ideal democratic state, but the authoritarian excesses that led to the Tienanmen massacre have long since been mitigated. China dominates the world economically and technologically, but has not conquered it militarily. Indeed, the situation is somewhat analogous to the twenty-first century American triumphalist vision, or even, some would argue, the present, with China occupying the position of the United States. In the shadow of the Chinese superpower, a Marxist revolution has taken place in the United States, and America has become a political, economic, and cultural Chinese vassal state. Its economy is dominated by Chinese investment, its political system apes the Chinese model, its pop culture is thoroughly Sinosized, its esthetics are dominated by a kind of Chinese chic, and its populace is lorded over by Chinese expatriates.

The genius of the novel lies in the way McHugh portrays an evolved, successful, Marxist, dominant China that is still so thoroughly Chinese, warts and all—collectivist, rather authoritarian, puritanical, homophobic, rather nakedly racist. Neither a utopia nor a dystopia, but a realistically ambiguous alternate future with the ring of higher probability than the shock of the initial notion leads one to think.

We follow Zhang and several subsidiary characters on their personal odysseys through this world, their stories intersecting in sometimes curiously oblique manners, and throughout it all, McHugh maintains a focus squarely on the personal. Despite its fascinating and unusual background, despite its masterful wealth of cultural detail, *China Mountain Zhang* is not a political novel. Here is a possible future world, McHugh seems to be saying, without really passing any moral or political judgments, and this is how the stories of some people's lives play out within its parameters. It lives, it breathes, it is real.

Fellow Traveler, by William Barton and Michael Capobianco, another novel in which Communism has not exactly faded away, most certainly *is* a political novel, a passionate political novel, an angry political novel, and indeed, a novel with a specific and focused political goal. That is both its strength and weakness.

Published in July 1991, hence written well before the failed August coup, the resignation of Gorbachev, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and tied to specific

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dates in the near future as early as 1994 (always an unnecessary mistake), *Fellow Traveler* would seem to be a dismal failure as prophecy.

In this future, perestroika has succeeded, the Soviet Union still exists, Boris Yeltsin is president, and Mikhail Gorbachev, an actual viewpoint character if a minor one, is Secretary General of a Communist Party that still holds much of the real power. Most of the major viewpoint characters are Soviet cosmonauts.

The Soviet space program has pulled up its socks while the American space program has sadly proceeded further along its current vector. The Soviets have a fairly large Earth-orbiting station, and a circumlunar station as well, with the logistical systems to support them, all of it based on existing Soviet space technology or stuff already in the early development stage today, which, as we shall see, is a major point. The Americans have concentrated on SDI, have much more sophisticated technology with all the bells and whistles, but have abandoned the High Frontier for other than military purposes.

Sinue, a small, near-Earth nickel-iron asteroid, is discovered approaching the Earth, and the Soviets, lead by a technologically knowledgeable, space-visionary Gorbachev, cancel a lunar-landing mission in order to use the vehicle to cobble together a jackleg mission to Sinue. The idea is to use nuclear explosives to goose it into a stable Earth orbit, where it will serve as a raw material source for a great leap forward toward a true solar-system wide civilization.

The United States, led by a pinhead of a president manipulated by a rabid general, declares that this is a violation of various treaties, a cynical TV network helps promote the notion that the Soviets may really be planning to crash the asteroid into the United States, and the Americans set out to thwart the Soviet mission by military means.

Most of this 381 page novel consists of a detailed description of two Soviet missions to Sinue, told from the points of view of the cosmonauts involved.

That, and the denouement, which it would not be fair to reveal, is the whole story of *Fellow Traveler,* though along the way, via flashbacks, we get a lot of interesting stuff on life in the Soviet Union from the Brezhnev era into the very near future.

As prediction, *Fellow Traveler* would seem to have been overtaken by events while it was being written or even before. As fiction, there really isn't that much story there.

Fellow Traveler, however, does not seem to have been intended as prediction, but, as the authors themselves candidly state in an introductory note, as best-case scenario. And indeed, in a long appendix, they lay out the orbital mechanics of reaching various near-Earth asteroids, and argue the utility of moving one into Earth-orbit.

In other words, *Fellow Traveler* is overtly intended as propaganda, a polemic against the policies that have brought the American space program to its present sad pass, and, at least in theory, as an ardent plea for the Soviets to actually

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mount such a mission.

The bulk of the novel's wordage is taken up by immensely detailed description of how the Soviets could carry out the mission using hardware already in existence or in the developmental stage. This is done in exhaustive detail, and must have been the result of a huge amount of research, and in the end, it is utterly convincing on a technological level.

Unfortunately, it is also quite exhausting to read as fiction. Everything, and I do mean everything, from shuttle launches to orbital rendezvous, to the exploration of Sinue, is described in minute and often jargon-laden detail. Barton and Capobianco seem to have set out to design this mission and prove its technological viability to the most skeptical engineer by leaving nothing to the imagination or chance. One thoroughly believes that this novel could be translated into Russian, handed to the Soviet space authorities, and the mission plan could be carried out by them to the last valve and grommet.

Of course this makes the whole thing plod rather leadenly along as fiction. It's as if a contemporary novel could not move a character from Los Angeles to New York without describing the workings of the engine of the car that takes him to LAX, the avionics of a 747, the JFK air traffic control system, the mechanics of the baggage carousel, the escalators, the taxi-cab, the subway system, and everything in between.

As prediction, *Fellow Traveler* is not at all credible, and as fiction, it lacks both narrative tension and plotline surprise.

And yet. . . .

And yet it is not entirely a failure on its own chosen terms. It *does* succeed in portraying Soviet cosmonauts as both idealists and believable humans. It does mercilessly skewer the American space advocacy community for its naïve collaboration in the militarization of the space program, a job which certainly needs doing. And while the vicious stupidity of American politicians, generals, and media mavens portrayed may not be entirely realistic, the operative attitudes thereof are not far off the mark.

And while the future Gorbachev herein fantasized—technologically sophisticated, possessed of a clear vision of the species' space-going future, ready, willing, and able to bring it about—scarcely seems a believable projection based upon present events, or what we know of the real man, don't we wish it could be so?

Could thou and I but with Fate conspire
To seize this sorry scheme of things entire
Would we not shape it closer to the heart's desire?

Is it wrong to try?

On the very last page of *Fellow Traveler*, a Soviet cosmonaut speaks to an American vice-president:

"Your capitalism, whatever else it may be, denies the future. It has no underlying philosophical unity, no goal other than immediate personal gratification. . . . Money doesn't *dream*, you see, and now we will bury you after all."

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Maybe. Maybe not. But whatever the presently clouded near future may unfold in the real world, America must not fear to dream improbable dreams or eschew their pursuit in favor of the sacred bottom line, and science fiction must not shirk the contemplation of the multiplexity of that future for fear of getting it wrong.

If we do, we will not need the possibly non-existent heirs of Marx and Lenin and Khrushchev and Gorbachev to bury us.

Alas, we are quite capable of doing the job ourselves. ●

NEXT ISSUE

Stephen Kraus makes a sizzling *IAsfm* debut next month with our compelling September cover story, "Bright River"—taking us across the galaxy to a hostile and frightening alien world of constantly erupting volcanos, in company with a thrill-hungry daredevil who is determinded to be the first person to kayak down a river of molten lava, and who finds an adventure more strange and dangerous than even *he* had bargained for.... Next, the legendary **L. Sprague de Camp,** one of the seminal figures in the development of modern science fiction, celebrates the fifty-fifth anniversary of his first science fiction sale by bringing us a new Reginald Rivers story—a sequel to his famous "A Gun for Dinosaur"—the fast and funny tale of what happens when Reg shepherds a motley and mismatched crew of time-traveling Big-Game Hunters into the remote past... including a *very* peculair character they come to call "The Synthetic Barbarian." This one is hugely entertaining *and* marks a milestone in science fiction history—don't miss it!

ALSO IN SEPTEMBER: **Michael Swanwick,** one of our most popular writers, gives us a front-row seat in a crowded concert hall in an alternate Soviet Union to witness the most surprising performance of a *very* surprising rock star, in the wry "In Concert"; hot new writer **Tony Daniel** returns with a big, powerful new novella, taking us down some very Mean Streets in a gritty high-tech Alabama of the future, as a lone cop battles corrupt officials, the Mob, the sinister group-minds known as the Ideals, and his own haunted past, to unravel the deadly secret at the heart of the "Death of Reason"; new writer **Jonathan Lethem** treats us to a rousing, high-energy game of basketball, twenty-first century-style, in the fast-paced and exciting "Vanilla Dunk"; and new writer **Leslie What,** making a gonzo *IAsfm* debut, gives us a very funny look at just what is might *really* be like to be "King for a Day." Plus our usual array of columns and features. Look for our September issue on sale on your newsstands on July 21, 1992.

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Join WorldCon by July 15, or pay higher door rate. Some cons focused on written SF (vs. gaming, TV, etc.) this time. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS. If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. For free listings, tell me about your con six months ahead. Look for me at cons with the Filthy Pierre badge and musical keyboard.

JUNE 1992

27-28—**WilfCon.** For info, write: % **Mullin, 69 Donald #6, Kitchener ON N2B 3G6.** Or phone: **(519) 743-9485 or 746-7840** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Waterloo ON (if city omitted, same as in address) on the Wilfrid Laurier campus. Guests will include: Weiner, Plourde.

JULY 1992

2-5—**Westercon. (602) 945-6890.** Omni Adams Hotel, Phoenix AZ. The big annual Western convention.

2-5—**AnimeCon. (408) 453-4000.** Red Lion Inn, San Jose CA. Japanese animation. Japanese guests.

3-5—**InConJunction. (317) 839-5519.** Adams Mark Hotel, Indianapolis IN. Alan Clark, Arlan Andrews.

4-5—**SF Days, % Sporck, Morikstr. 7, Hattingen W-4320, Germany. (011-49) 2324-52872.** Dusseldorf.

10-12—**Archon, Box 50125, Clayton MO 63105. (314) 326-3026.** Henry 8 Inn, St. Louis MO. Varley.

10-12—**ReaderCon, Box 1246, Boston MA 02238. (617) 868-0388.** Written SF & fantasy. Many writers.

10-12—**Shore Leave, Box 6809, Towson MD 21285. (301) 821-5563.** Star Trek con in Hunt Valley MD.

10-12—**Il-Khan, % Tegen, 2926 Valerie Cir., Colorado Springs CO 80917. (719) 597-5259.** Stasheff.

17-19—**DragonCon, Box 47696, Atlanta GA 30362. (404) 925-2813.** Big SF con, also a gaming slant.

17-19—**GayLaxiCon, Box 656, Washington DC 20044. (508) 838-2121.** Philadelphia PA. Gay fans' con.

17-19—**PhroliCon, Box 42195, Philadelphia PA 19101.** Hilton, Mt. Laurel NJ. Low key. E. Friesner.

17-19—**NECon, Box 528, E. Greenwich RI 02818. (401) 823-3242.** Dark fantasy & horror convention.

17-19—**ConVersion, Box 1088, Stn. M, Calgary AB T2P 2K9. (403) 242-1807.** Literary SF & fantasy.

17-19—**ConFluence, Box 3681, Pittsburgh PA 15230. (412) 344-0456.** *Theme: Where the Authors Are.*

24-26—**ConGenial, Box 44146, Madison WI 53744. (708) 215-0272.** M. P. Kube-McDowell, J. Mealy.

SEPTEMBER 1992

3-7—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 859-8421.** The World SF Con. $110 to 7/15/92.

SEPTEMBER 1993

2-6—**ConFrancisco, 712 Bancroft Rd. 1993, Walnut Creek CA 94598. (510) 945-1993.** WorldCon in SF.

SEPTEMBER 1994

1-5—**ConAdian, Box 2430, Winnipeg MB R3C 4A7. (204) 942-3427 (fax).** WorldCon. C$85/US$75.

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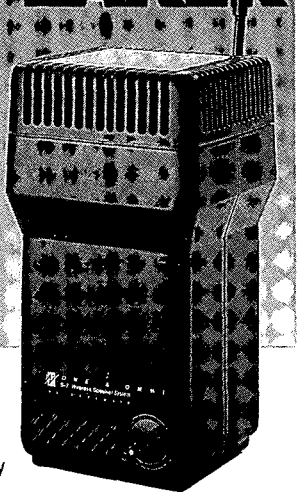

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